

THE TAIN



I THE PILLOW TALK



ONCE when the royal bed was laid out for Ailill and Medb in Cruachan fort in Connacht, they had this talk on the pillows:

‘It is true what they say, love,’ Ailill said, ‘it is well for the wife of a wealthy man.’

‘True enough,’ the woman said. ‘What put that in your mind?’

‘It struck me,’ Ailill said, ‘how much better off you are today than the day I married you.’

‘I was well enough off without you,’ Medb said.

‘Then your wealth was something I didn’t know or hear much about,’ Ailill said. ‘Except for your woman’s things, and the neighbouring enemies making off with loot and plunder.’

‘Not at all,’ Medb said, ‘but with the high king of Ireland for my father — Eochaid Feidlech the steadfast, the son of **Finn, the son of Finnoman, the son of Finnen**, the son of Finngoll, the son of Roth, the son of Rigéon. the son of Blathacht, the son of Beothacht, the son of Enna Agnech, the son of Aengus Turbech. He had six daughters: Derbriu, Ethne, Ele, Clothru, Muguin, and myself Medb, the highest and haughtiest of them. I outdid them in grace and giving and battle and warlike combat. I had fifteen hundred soldiers in my royal pay, all exiles’ sons, and the same number of freeborn native men, **and for every paid soldier I had ten more men, and nine more**, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one. And that was only our ordinary household.

‘My father gave me a whole province of Ireland, this province ruled from Cruachan, which is why I am called “Medb of Cruachan.” And they came from Finn the king of Leinster, Rus Ruad’s son, to woo me, and from Coirpre Niafer the king of Temair, another of Rus Ruad’s sons. They came from Conchobor, king of Ulster, son of Fachtna, and they came from Eochaid Bee, and I wouldn’t go. For I asked a harder wedding gift than any woman ever asked before from a man in Ireland — the absence of meanness and jealousy and fear.

‘If I married a mean man our union would be wrong, because I’m so full of grace and giving. It would be an insult if I were more generous than my husband, but not if the two of us were equal in this. If my husband was a timid man our union would be just as wrong because I thrive, myself, on all kinds of trouble. It is an insult for a wife to be more spirited than her husband, but not if the two are equally spirited. If I married a jealous man that would be wrong, too: I never had one man without another waiting in his shadow. So I got the kind of man I wanted: Rus Ruad’s other son — yourself, Ailill, from Leinster. You aren’t greedy or jealous or sluggish. When we were promised, I brought you the best wedding gift a bride can bring: apparel enough for a dozen men, a chariot worth thrice seven bondmaids, the width of your face of red gold and the weight of your left arm of light gold. So, if anyone causes you shame or upset or trouble, the right to compensation is mine,’ Medb said, ‘for you’re a kept man.’

‘By no means,’ Ailill said, ‘but with two kings for my brothers, Coirpre in Temair and Finn over Leinster. I let them rule because they were older, not because they are better than I am in grace or giving. I never heard, in all Ireland, of a province run by a woman except this one, which is why I came and took the kingship here, in succession to my mother Mata Muireasc, Mágach’s daughter. Who better for my queen than you, a daughter of the high king of Ireland?’

‘It still remains,’ Medb said, ‘that my fortune is greater than yours.’

‘You amaze me,’ Ailill said. ‘No one has more property or jewels or precious things than I have, and I know it.’

Then the lowliest of their possessions were brought out, to see who had more property and jewels and precious things: their buckets and tubs and iron pots, jugs and wash-pails and vessels with handles. Then their fingerrings, bracelets, thumb-rings and gold treasures were brought out, and their cloth of purple, blue, black, green and yellow, plain grey and many-coloured, yellow-brown, checked and striped. Their herds of sheep were taken in off the fields and meadows and plains. They were measured and matched, and found to be the same in numbers and size. Even the great ram leading Medb’s sheep, the worth of one bondmaid by himself, had a ram to match him leading Ailill’s sheep.

From pasture and paddock their teams and herds of horses were brought in. For the finest stallion in Medb’s stud, worth one bondmaid by himself, Ailill had a stallion to match. Their vast herds of pigs were taken in from the woods and gullies and waste places. They were measured and matched and noted, and Medb had one fine boar, but Ailill had another. Then their droves and free-wandering herds of cattle were brought in from the woods and wastes of the province. These were matched and measured and noted also, and found to be the same in number and size. But there was one great bull in Ailill’s herd, that had been a calf of one of Medb’s cows — Finnbennach was his name, the White Horned — and Finnbennach, refusing

to be led by a woman, had gone over to the king's herd. Medb couldn't find in her herd the equal of this bull, and her spirits dropped as though she hadn't a single penny.

Medb had the messenger Mac Roth called, and she told him to see where the match of the bull might be found, in any province in Ireland.

'I know where to find such a bull and better,' Mac Roth said: 'in the province of Ulster, in the territory of Cuailnge, in Dáire mac Fiachna's house. Donn Cuailnge is the bull's name, the Brown Bull of Cuailnge.'

'Go there, Mac Roth,' Medb said. 'Ask Dáire to lend me Donn Cuailnge for a year. At the end of the year he can have fifty yearling heifers in payment for the loan, and the Brown Bull of Cuailnge back. And you can offer him this too, Mac Roth, if the people of the country think badly of losing their fine jewel, the Donn Cuailnge: if Dáire himself comes with the bull I'll give him a portion of the fine Plain of Ai equal to his own lands, and a chariot worth thrice seven bondmaids, and my own friendly thighs on top of that.'

Messengers set out to Dáire mac Fiachna's house: there were nine of them with Mac Roth. Mac Roth was soon made welcome in Dáire's house, as befitted Ireland's chief messenger. Dáire asked him what brought him on his journey, and the chief messenger told him why he came, and about the squabble between Medb and Ailill.

'So I am here to ask for the loan of the Donn Cuailnge, to match against Finnbennach,' he said. 'And you'll get fifty yearling heifers back in payment for the loan, with the Donn Cuailnge himself and more besides. If you come with the bull yourself you'll get a portion of the fine Plain of Ai equal to your own lands, and a chariot worth thrice seven bondmaids, and Medb's friendly thighs on top of it all.'

Dáire was delighted, and jumped for joy till the seams of his cushion burst under him, and he cried:

'True as my soul! I don't care what the Ulstermen think, I'll take my treasure, the Donn Cuailnge, to Ailill and Medb in the land of Connacht.'

Mac Roth was pleased at mac Fiachna's decision.

Then they were looked after, and rushes and fresh straw were settled under them. They were given the best of good food and kept supplied with the festive fare until they grew drunk and noisy.

Two of the messengers were talking. One of them said:

'There's no doubt, the man of the house here is a good man.'

'A good man certainly,' the other said.

'Is there a better man in Ulster?' the first messenger said.

'There is, certainly,' the second messenger said. 'His leader Conchobor is a better man. If the whole of Ulster gave in to him, it would be no shame for them. Anyway, it was good of him to give us the Donn Cuailnge. It would have taken four strong provinces of Ireland to carry it off from Ulster otherwise.'

A third man joined the talk.

'What are you arguing about?' he said.

‘This messenger here said, “The man of the house here is a good man.” “A good man certainly,” the other said. “Is there a better man in Ulster?” the first messenger said. “There is, certainly,” the second messenger said. “His leader Conchobor is a better man. If the whole of Ulster gave in to him, it would be no shame for them. But it was good of him to give us what the four strong provinces of Ireland would be needed to take from Ulster.”’

‘I’d as soon see the mouth that said that spout blood! We would have taken it anyway, with or without his leave.’

At that moment the man in charge of Dáire mac Fiachna’s household came into the hut, with a man carrying drink and another man with food, and heard what they were saying. He was seized with fury, and put down their food and drink, saying neither ‘Eat’ nor ‘Don’t eat.’ He went back straight to Dáire mac Fiachna’s hut and said:

‘Did you give our famous treasure, the Donn Cuailnge, to Medb’s messengers?’

‘Yes I did,’ Dáire said.

‘That was not a kingly thing to do. What they said is true: if you hadn’t given him up freely the hosts of Ailill and Medb, and the cunning of Fergus mac Roich, would have had him without your leave.’

‘By the gods I worship, nothing leaves here unless I choose to let it!’

They waited until morning. The messengers got up early the next day and went to Dáire’s hut.

Tell us, sir, where to find the Donn Cuailnge.’

‘I will not,’ Dáire said. ‘And only it isn’t my habit to murder messengers or travellers or any other wayfarers, not one of you would leave here alive.’

‘Why is this?’ Mac Roth said.

‘For a good reason,’ Dáire said. ‘You said if I didn’t give willingly, the hosts of Ailill and Medb, and Fergus’s cunning, would make me give.’

‘Indeed,’ Mac Roth said, ‘what messengers say into your food and drink hardly deserves your notice. You can’t blame Ailill and Medb.’

‘Still, I won’t give up my bull this time, Mac Roth, as long as I can help it.’

So the messengers set off again and came to Cruachan, the stronghold of Connacht. Medb asked them for the news and Mac Roth said Dáire wouldn’t give up his bull.

‘Why not?’ Medb said.

Mac Roth told what had happened.

‘We needn’t polish the knobs and knots in this, Mac Roth,’ Medb said. ‘It was well known it would be taken by force if it wasn’t given freely. And taken it will be.’

II THE TAIN BO CUAILNGE BEGINS

AILILL and Medb assembled a great army in Connacht, and they sent word also to the other three provinces. Ailill sent out messengers as well [to his brothers, the rest of Mágach’s seven](#)

sons. Besides Ailill there were Anluan, Mugcorb, Cet, En, Bascall and Dóchae, and each of them had a troop of three thousand. And he sent to Conchobor's son, Cormac Comnlongas, the leader of the Ulster exiles, and his troop of three thousand who were living in Connacht. Soon they all came to Cruachan Ai.

Cormac, marching to Cruachan, had three companies. The first company wore speckled cloaks wrapped around them. Their hair was clipped. Tunics covered them to the knee. They carried full-length shields and each man had a broad grey stabbing-spear on a slender shaft. The second company wore dark-grey cloaks around them and redembroidered tunics that reached to their calves. Their hair was drawn back on their heads and they carried bright shields before them and five-pronged spears in their hands.



‘I don’t see Cormac yet,’ Medb said.

Then the third troop came up. They wore purple cloaks and red-embroidered hooded tunics reaching to their feet. Their hair was trimmed to the shoulder. They carried curved scalloped shields, and a spear like a palace pillar in each man's hand.

'I see him now,' Medb said.

Four of the provinces of Ireland gathered there at Cruachan Ai. Their sages and druids delayed them for a fortnight waiting for a sign. The day they finally set out Medb said to her charioteer:

'Everyone leaving a lover or a friend today will curse me,' she said. 'This army is gathered for me.'

'Wait a minute,' the charioteer said, 'until I turn the chariot around [to the right, with the sun](#), to draw down the power of the sign for our safe return.'

He turned the chariot round and made to set off. But they saw a young grown girl in front of them. She had yellow hair. She wore a speckled cloak fastened around her with a gold pin, a red-embroidered hooded tunic and sandals with gold clasps. Her brow was broad, her jaw narrow, her two eyebrows pitch black, with delicate dark lashes casting shadows half way down her cheeks. You would think her lips were inset with Parthian scarlet. Her teeth were like an array of jewels between the lips. She had hair in three tresses: two wound upward on her head and the third hanging down her back, brushing her calves. She held a light gold [weaving-rod](#) in her hand, with gold inlay. Her eyes had triple irises. Two black horses drew her chariot, and she was armed.

'What is your name?' Medb said to the girl.

'I am Fedelm, and I am a woman poet of Connacht.'

'Where have you come from?' Medb said.

'From learning [verse and vision](#) in Alba,' the girl said.

'Have you the *imbas forasnai*, the Light of Foresight?' Medb said.

'Yes I have,' the girl said.

'Then look for me and see what will become of my army.'

So the girl looked.

Medb said, 'Fedelm, prophetess; how seest thou the host?'

Fedelm said in reply:

'I see it crimson, I see it red.'

'It can't be true,' Medb said. 'Conchobor is suffering his pangs in Emain with all the rest of the Ulster warriors. My messengers have come from there and told me. Fedelm, prophetess; how seest thou our host?'

'I see it crimson, I see it red,' the girl said.

'That is false,' Medb said. 'Celtchar mac Uthidir is still in Dun Lethglaise with a third of Ulster's forces, and Fergus son of Roech mac Echdach and his troop of three thousand are here with us in exile. Fedelm, prophetess; how seest thou our host?' Medb said.

'I see it crimson, I see it red,' the girl said.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Medb said. ‘Wrath and rage and red wounds are common when armies and large forces gather. So look once more and tell us the truth. Fedelm, prophetess; how seest thou our host?’

‘I see it crimson, I see it red,’ the girl said.

‘I see a battle: a blond man
with much blood about his belt
and a hero-halo round his head.
His brow is full of victories.

Seven hard heroic jewels
are set in the iris of his eye.
[His jaws are settled in a snarl.](#)
He wears a looped, red tunic.

A noble countenance I see,
working effect on womenfolk;
a young man of sweet colouring;
a form dragonish in the fray.

His great valour brings to mind
Cúchulainn of Murtheimne,
the hound of Culann, full of fame.
Who he is I cannot tell
but I see, now, the whole host
coloured crimson by his hand.

A giant on the plain I see,
doing battle with the host,
holding in each of his two hands
four short quick swords.

I see him hurling against that host
two *gae bolga* and a spear
and an ivory-hilted sword,
each weapon to its separate task.

He towers on the battlefield
in breastplate and red cloak.
Across the sinister chariot-wheel
the Warped Man deals death
— that fair form I first beheld
melted to a mis-shape.

I see him moving to the fray:
take warning, watch him well,
Cúchulainn, Sualdam's son!
Now I see him in pursuit.

Whole hosts he will destroy,
making dense massacre.
In thousands you will yield your heads.
I am Fedelm. I hide nothing.

The blood starts from warrior's wounds
— total ruin — at his touch:
your warriors dead, the warriors
of Deda mac Sin prowling loose;
torn corpses, women wailing,
because of him — the Forge-Hound.'

The Monday after Samain they set out. [This is the way they went](#), southeast from Cruachan Ai:

through Muicc Cruinb,
through Terloch Teóra Crích, the marshy lake bed
where three territories meet,
by Tuaim Móna, the peat ridge,
through Cúil Silinne, where Carrcin Lake is now — it
was named after Silenn, daughter of Madchar,
by Fid and Bolga, woods and hills,
through Coltain, and across the Sinann river,
through Glúne Gabair,
over Trego Plain, of the spears,
through Tethba, North and South,
through Tiarthechta,
through Ord, 'the hammer,'
through Sláis southward,
by the river Indiuind, 'the anvil,'
through Carn,
through Ochtrach, 'the dung heap,'
through Midi, the land of Meath,
through Finnglassa Assail, of the clear streams,
by the river Deilt,
through Delind,
through Sailig,

through Slaibre of the herds,
through Slechta, where they hewed their way,
through Cúil Sibrille,
southward by Ochaine hill,
northward by Uatu,
by the river Dub,
southward through Comur,
through Tromma,
through Othromma eastward,
through Sláni and its pasture Gortsláni,
southward by Druim Licce, ‘the flagstone ridge,’
by Ath Gabla, the ford of the forked branch,
through Ard Achad, the high field,
northward by Féraind,
by Finnabair,
through Assi southward,
by the ridge Druim Sálfinn,
by the ridge Druim Cain, on the Midluachair road,
by mac Dega’s ridge,
by Eódond Mór and Eódond Bec, the great dark yewtree and the lesser,
by Méthe Tog and Méthe nEoin, ‘squirrel neck’ and ‘bird neck,’
by the ridge Druim Cáemtechta,
through Scúaip and Imscúaip,
through Cenn Ferna,
through Baile and Aile,
through Báil Scena and Dáil Scena,
through Fertse,
by the wooded promontory Ros Lochad,
through Sale,
through Lochmach, or Muid Loga,
through Anmag, the noble plain,
by Dinn height,
by the river Deilt,
by the river Dubglais,
through Fid Mór, or Fid Móthruaille, the Wood of the
Great Scabbard,
to the river Colptha

and to the river Cronn in Cuailnge.

These are the places they were to pass on their way to Finnabair in Cuailnge. It was from Finnabair that the armies of Ireland later split up across the province to look for the bull.

III THE ARMY ENCOUNTERS CUCHULAINN

ON the first stage of their march they went from Cruachan to Cúil Silinne, at Carrcin Lake. Medb told her charioteer to yoke up her nine chariots ready to make a circuit of the camp, to see who was slow and who eager on the march.

Meanwhile Ailill's tent was pitched and his things settled, the beds and coverlets. Next to Ailill came Fergus mac Roich in his tent; next to Fergus, Cormac Connlunga, Conchobor's son; next to him, Conall Cernach; and next to him, Fiacha mac Fir Febe, the son of Conchobor's daughter. Medb was to settle the other side of Ailill; next to her their daughter, Finnabair; and next to her, Flidais. Not to speak of menservants and attendants.

Medb came back from inspecting the armies and said it would be foolish to go on if they let the troop of three thousand Galeóin, from north Leinster, come with them.

'What fault have you found with them?' Ailill said.

'I find no fault with them,' Medb said. 'They are fine soldiers. While the others were making a space for their camp they had roofed theirs and were making their meal. While the others were eating they had finished their meal and had their harpers playing. So it would be foolish to take them,' Medb said. 'They would get all the credit for our army's triumph.'

'But they are fighting on our side,' Ailill said.

'They can't come,' Medb said.

'Let them stay, then,' Ailill said.

'No, they can't stay either,' Medb said. 'They would only come and seize our lands when we are gone.'

'Well, what are we going to do with them,' Ailill said, 'if they can neither stay nor come?'

'Kill them,' Medb said.

'That is a woman's thinking and no mistake!' Ailill said. 'A wicked thing to say.'

'These men are our friends,' Fergus said, for the Ulster exiles. 'You will take this evil advice over our dead bodies.'

'We might do that,' Medb said. 'I have my own following of twice three thousand here. There are my sons too, the seven Maine, with their seven troops of three thousand — may they always have luck. There is Maine Máthramail the Motherlike, Maine Athramail the Fatherlike, Maine Mórgor the strongly dutiful, Maine Míngor the sweetly dutiful, Maine Móepirt who is above description (some call him Maine Milscothach of the honeyed speech), Maine Andoe the swift, and Maine Cotagaib Uli — the Maine with all the qualities, who took the likeness of his mother and father, and the dignity of us both.'

'That is not the whole story,' Fergus said. 'We have seven Munster kings on our side, each

with a troop of three thousand. Here and now, in this camp, I could bring those seven troops of three thousand into battle against you, with my own three thousand and the Galeóin troop. But we don't need that,' Fergus said. 'We can arrange these warriors in the army so that they won't stand out too much. There are seventeen troops of us, of three thousand each,' Fergus said; 'that is the full number of our camp, not counting the general rabble or the young or the women — each king has his queen travelling with Medb. The Galeóin troop is the eighteenth troop here. We can scatter them out among the whole army.'

'I don't mind,' Medb said, 'as long as they break up their present order.'

So that is what they did: the Galeóin were scattered amongst the army.

Next morning they set out toward Móin Coltna, the moor near Coltain. They found eight score of wild deer there in one herd, and encircled and slaughtered them. Wherever there was one of the Galeóin it was he who got the deer, except for five that were got by the rest of the army.

They came to Trego Plain and broke their march there and got their meal ready. They say it is here that Dubthach chanted:

'Take note now, listen well
to my vision of this war.
A dark march lies ahead
toward Ailill's wife's White Horn.

One man, worth a whole host,
comes to guard Murtheimne's herds.
Two pig-keepers were friends once —
now crows will drink a cruel milk.

The river Cronn will rise, all clay,
and bar the way to Murtheimne
[until that warrior's work is done](#)
at Mount Ochaina to the north.

"Quickly," Ailill says to Cormac,
"hurry to your son's side!"
Cattle calm upon the plains —
the hard raiders herding men.

Then a battle, in due time,
with Medb and one third of the host —
man's meat everywhere
that the Warped Man can reach.'

Immediately the war-spirit [Nemain](#) assailed them. They had no peace that night, with their sleep broken by Dubthach's brute outcry. Groups of them started up, and many of the army

remained troubled until Medb came and calmed them. They went on then and spent the night in Gránaird in North Tethba.

Fergus sent a warning from there to the men of Ulster, because of old friendship. They were still prostrate in their pangs, all but Cúchulainn and his father Sualdam. When Fergus's warning came Cúchulainn and his father went out as far as Iraid Cuillenn and set up watch for the armies there.

'I feel the presence of the armies tonight,' Cúchulainn said to his father. '[You must go and warn Ulster](#). I have promised to spend the night with Fedelm Noichride.' (Though some say his meeting was with her bondmaid, who was set aside for Cúchulainn's use.) Before he left he made [a spancel-hoop of challenge](#) and cut an [ogam](#) message into the peg fastening it, and left it there for them on top of a standing stone.

Fergus was given the head of the army, out in front of the troops. He made a great detour southward to give Ulster time to gather an army together — he did this out of old friendship. But Ailill and Medb noticed it, and Medb said:

'Fergus, there is something wrong.
What kind of road is this we're taking?
— straying to the south or north,
crossing every kind of land.

Ailill and his army
begin to think of treachery.
Or have you not yet set your mind
to leading us upon our way?

If old friendship is the cause
give up your first place on the march.
Perhaps another can be found
to take us on our proper way.'

Fergus answered:

'Medb, what is troubling you?
There's no treachery in this.
The land where I am taking you
— remember it is Ulster.

I take these turnings as they come
not to bring the host to harm
but to miss the mighty man
who protects Murtheimne Plain.

Do you think I don't know
every winding way I take?
I think ahead, trying to miss

Cúchulainn son of Sualdam.'

Then they came to Iraird Cuilleinn.

Err and Innel and their two charioteers Foich and Fochlam (these were the four sons of Urard mac Anchinne) were out in front of the army, keeping their rugs and cloaks and brooches from being soiled by the dusts of the multitude. They found the spancel-hoop thrown there by Cúchulainn and saw the marks of how his horses had grazed. Sualdam's two horses had bitten the grass, roots and all, out of the earth, while Cúchulainn's horses had licked up the very clay as well, down to the stones beneath the grass.

They sat and waited for the armies to come up, while their musicians played for them.

They gave the spancel-hoop to Fergus mac Roich, and he read the ogam cut into the hoop.

When Medb came up she said:

'Why are you waiting here?'

'We are waiting because of this spancel-hoop,' Fergus said. 'There is an ogam message on the peg. It says: "Come no further, unless you have a man who can make a hoop like this with one hand out of one piece. I exclude my friend Fergus." It is clear Cúchulainn did this,' Fergus said. 'It was his horses that grazed the plain.'

Fergus gave it into the druids' hands and chanted:

'This hoop: what does it mean to us?

What is the riddle of the hoop?

How many men put it here?

A small number? A multitude?

Will it bring the host to harm

if they pass it on their way?

Druids, discover if you can

the reasons it was left here.'

The druids answered:

'It was a great champion made it

and left it as a trap for men,

an angry barrier against kings

— one man, single-handed.

The royal host must come no further,

according to the rule of war,

unless you have a man among you

who can do what he has done.

This is the reason, and no other,

why the spancel-hoop was left.'

Then Fergus told them:

‘If you ignore this challenge and pass by, the fury of the man who cut that ogam will reach you even if you are under protection, or locked in your homes. Unless someone can match this hoop of challenge he will kill one of you before morning.’

‘We have certainly no wish to see one of our men killed so soon,’ Ailill said. ‘If we go through the neck of that great forest there south of us, Fid Duin, we needn’t pass here.’

Then the men of the armies cut down the forest before the chariots. The place is now called Slechta, the Hewn Place.

It is told in other books that it was after they had reached Fid Dúin, the forest fortress, that they saw the chariot with the beautiful young girl — that it was here the story of the prophetess Fedelm, already given above, took place, and that the forest was cut down after a certain answer she gave to Medb. (“Look for me, and see what will become of my army,” Medb had said. “It is too hard,” the girl said: “I can’t see them properly in this forest.” “Then it will be made ploughed land,” Medb said: “we will cut down the forest.”) And that thus the place is called Slechta.

It is here that the [Partraigi](#) dwell.

They passed the night in Cúil Sibrille — Cenannos, as it is now called. A great snow fell on them, over the men’s belts and the chariot wheels. They could get no food ready, and rose early the next day, after passing a hard night in the snow.

But it wasn’t so early when Cúchulainn got up from his woman, and it was later still when he had scrubbed and scoured himself and found the track of the army.

‘I wish we hadn’t gone there,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘and betrayed Ulster. We let an army through and gave no warning. Reckon up the army’s tracks for us,’ Cúchulainn said to Laeg, ‘until we see how many of them there are.’

Laeg did so, and said to Cúchulainn:

‘This is confusing. I can’t reckon it.’

‘It wouldn’t confuse me if I went up there.’ Cúchulainn said.

‘Get into the chariot then,’ Laeg said.

Cúchulainn got into the chariot and tried for a long time to reckon up the army from their tracks.

‘Even you don’t find it easy,’ Laeg said.

‘Still it is easier for me than you,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘with my three talents of sight and intellect and reckoning. I have made up a count now,’ he said. ‘There are eighteen troops of three thousand here, as I count them, but the eighteenth troop of three thousand has been divided out among the whole army. That is what is mixing up the count, the three thousand Galeóin.’

Cúchulainn went around the armies until he reached Ath Gabla. There he cut out a tree-fork with a single stroke of his sword and stuck it in the middle of the stream, so that a chariot would have no room to pass it on either side. ([It is from this that the name Ath Gabla comes, the ford of the forked branch.](#)) The warriors Err and Innel, and their two charioteers Foich and Fochlam, came upon him. He cut off their four heads and tossed them onto the four points of the

tree-fork.

The horses of the four men went back toward the army with their coverings all crimson. Everyone thought there was a battle-force [waiting for them at the ford](#). A troop of them went to inspect the ford, but they saw nothing there except the track of a single chariot, and the fork with the four heads and the words in ogam cut into its side. Then the whole army came up.

‘Do these heads belong to our people?’ Medb said.

‘Yes they do, and to the very best among them,’ Ailill said.

One of their men read out the ogam on the side of the fork: that it was a single man who had thrown the fork, using one hand, and that they mustn’t go past until one of them — not Fergus — did the same, single-handed.

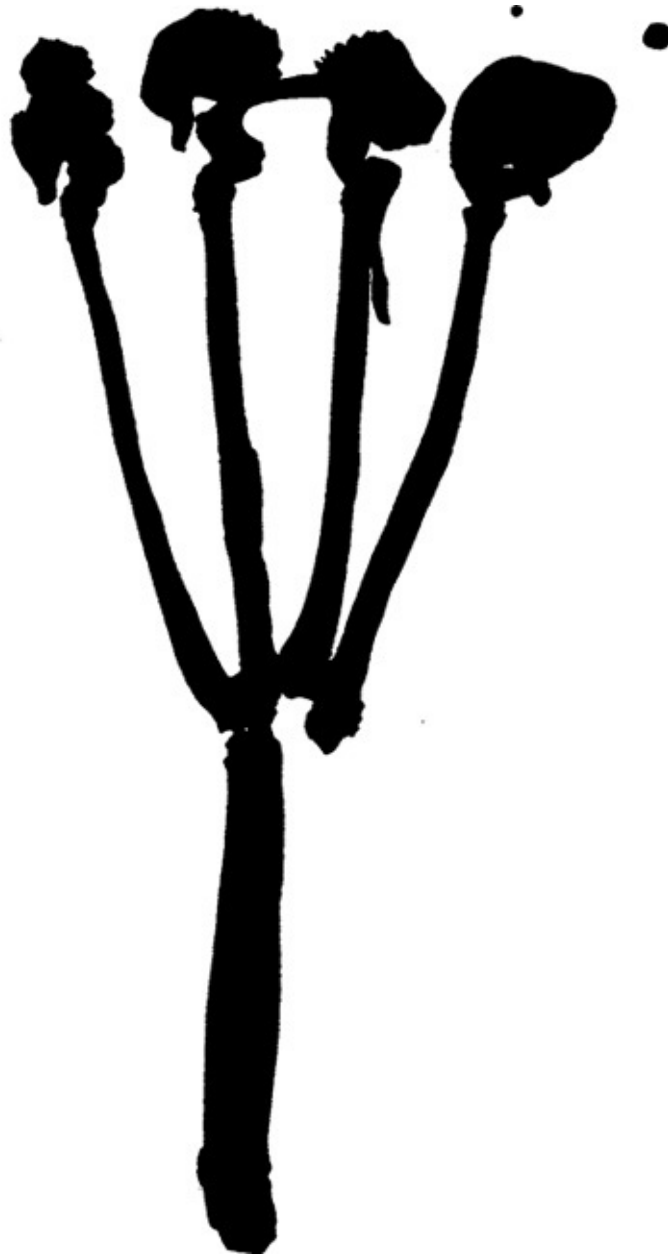
‘I am surprised,’ Ailill said, ‘how swiftly these four were killed.’

‘That isn’t what should surprise you,’ Fergus said, ‘but that the fork was struck from its trunk by a single stroke; that though its base is only a single cut this makes it better; and that it is driven in the way it is — for no hole was dug to receive it, and it was thrown one-handed from the back of a chariot.’

‘Get rid of the obstruction for us, Fergus,’ Medb said.

‘Give me a chariot, then,’ Fergus said. ‘I’ll take it out and make sure the base was made with only one cut.’

Fourteen of their chariots broke up under Fergus. Finally he brought the fork on to dry land with his own chariot and they could see that its base was a single cut.



‘We should turn our minds,’ Ailill said, ‘to the sort of people we are approaching. Let each of you get your food ready — it wasn’t easy for you last night with the snow — and then let us hear some of the doings and stories of the sort of people we are approaching.’

It was here that they heard for the first time about the exploits of Cúchulainn.

Ailill said:

‘Was it Conchobor who did this?’

‘No,’ Fergus said. ‘He never comes to the border country without a full battle-force around him.’

‘Was it Celtchar mac Uthidir, then?’

‘No. He never comes to the border country, either, without a full battle-force around him.’

‘Well, was it Eogan mac Durthacht?’

‘No’, Fergus said. ‘He would never cross the border without a troop of three thousand

bristling chariots around him. The man who did this deed,' Fergus said, 'is Cúchulainn. It is he who struck the branch from its base with a single stroke, and killed the four as swiftly as they were killed, and who came to the border with only his charioteer.'

'What sort of man,' Ailill said, 'is this Hound of Ulster we hear tell of? How old is this remarkable person?'

'It is soon told,' Fergus said. 'In his fifth year he went in quest of arms to the boy-troop in Emain Macha. In his seventh year he went to study the arts and crafts of war with Scáthach, and courted Emer. In his eighth year he took up arms. At present he is in his seventeenth year.'

'Is he the hardest they have in Ulster?' Medb said.

'Yes, the hardest of all,' Fergus said. 'You'll find no harder warrior against you — no point more sharp, more swift, more slashing; no raven more flesh-ravenous, no hand more deft, no fighter more fierce, no one of his own age one third as good, no lion more ferocious; no barrier in battle, no hard hammer, no gate of battle, no soldiers' doom, no hinderer of hosts, more fine. You will find no one there to measure against him — for youth or vigour; for apparel, horror or eloquence; for splendour, fame or form; for voice or strength or sternness; for cleverness, courage or blows in battle; for fire or fury, victory, doom or turmoil; for stalking, scheming or slaughter in the hunt; for swiftness, alertness or wildness; and no one with the battle-feat 'nine men on each point'—[none like Cúchulainn](#).'

'Let us not make too much of it,' Medb said. 'He has only one body. He can suffer wounding. He is not beyond being taken. Besides he is only in his early youth, and his manly deeds are yet to come.'

'By no means,' Fergus said. 'It would be nothing strange for him to do mighty deeds at this point. When he was younger his acts were already manly.'

IV CUCHULAINN'S BOYHOOD DEEDS

HE was reared,' Fergus said, 'by his father and mother [in their oaken house](#) on Murtheimne Plain. There he heard great rumours about the boys in Emain. Three times fifty boys,' Fergus said 'are always playing in Emain. Conchobor spends one third of his royal day watching the boys, one third playing [fidchell](#), and a third drinking ale until he falls asleep. There is no greater warrior in Ireland,' Fergus said. 'I say it though he drove me into exile.'

'Cúchulainn begged his mother to let him join the boy-troop.

'You can't go,' his mother said, 'until there are some Ulster warriors to go with you.'

'That is too long to wait,' Cúchulainn said. 'Point me out the way to Emain.'

'Northward there,' his mother said. 'But it is a hard road. Sliab Fuait blocks the way.'

'Still,' Cúchulainn said, 'I will try it.'

'So he set off, with a toy shield made out of sticks and a toy javelin and his hurling-stick and ball. He kept tossing his javelin ahead and catching it again before its tail hit the ground.

'Then he ran up to Conchobor's boys without getting them to pledge his safety. He didn't know that no one went out to them on their field of play without getting a promise of safety

from them.

“It is plain this young fellow is from Ulster,” said Follamain, Conchobor’s son, “and yet he dares us.”

‘They shouted at him, but still he came on against them. They flung three times fifty javelins at him, and he stopped them all on his shield of sticks. Then they drove all their hurling-balls at him, and he stopped every ball on his breast. They threw their hurling-sticks at him, three times fifty of them: he dodged so well that none of them touched him, except for a handful that he plucked down as they shot past.

‘The Warp-Spasm overtook him: it seemed each hair was hammered into his head, so sharply they shot upright. You would swear a fire-speck tipped each hair. He squeezed one eye narrower than the eye of a needle; he opened the other wider than the mouth of a goblet. He bared his jaws to the ear; he peeled back his lips to the eye-teeth till his gullet showed. The hero-halo rose up from the crown of his head.

‘Then he made onslaught on the boys. He laid low fifty of them before they got to the gate of Emain. Nine of them’, Fergus said, ‘flew past Conchobor and myself — we were playing *fidchell* — and he came leaping after the nine of them across the *fidchell* board. Conchobor caught him by the wrist.

“These boys are being roughly handled,” Conchobor said.

“I am in the right, friend Conchobor,” he said. “I left my home, and my mother and father, to join their games, and they treated me roughly.”

“Whose son are you?” Conchobor said. “What is your name?”

“I am Sétanta, son of Sualdam and your sister Deichtine. I didn’t expect to be hurt here.”

“Well, why didn’t you put yourself under the boys’ protection?” Conchobor said.

“I knew nothing about that,” Cúchulainn said, “but I ask your protection against them now.”

“You have it,” Conchobor said.

‘Then he turned away to chase through the house after the boy-troop.

“What are you going to do to them now?” Conchobor said.

“Offer them my protection,” Cúchulainn said.

“Promise it here and now,” Conchobor said.

“I promise,” Cúchulainn said.

‘Then everybody went out to the play-field and the boys who had been struck down began to get up, with the help of their foster-mothers and fathers.’

‘There was a time,’ Fergus said, ‘when he was a lad, that he couldn’t get to sleep at all in Emain Macha.

“Tell me, Cúchulainn, why you can’t sleep here in Emain,” Conchobor said to him.

“I can’t sleep unless I have the same level under my head and feet.”

‘So Conchobor had a block of stone brought for his head and another for his feet, and fixed a special bed between them for him.

‘A while afterwards, some man went in to wake him. Cúchulainn struck him on the forehead with his fist and drove the dome of the forehead back into the brain. He knocked the stone block flat with his arm.’

‘You can tell,’ Ailill said, ‘it was a warrior’s fist, the arm of a prodigy.’

‘Since that time,’ Fergus said, ‘no one dares to waken him, but leaves him to wake up by himself.’

‘Another time he was playing ball in the playing-field east of Emain. He stood alone against the three times fifty boys. He could always beat them in every game of this kind. Once they laid hold of him, but he worked his fist on them and knocked fifty of them senseless. Then he took flight and hid under the cushion of Conchobor’s bed. The whole of Ulster gathered against him — even I rose against him,’ Fergus said, ‘and Conchobor himself. He straightened under the bed and heaved it, bed and thirty clinging warriors, onto the floor of the house. There and then, in the house, he was encircled by Ulstermen. So,’ Fergus said, ‘we settled matters, and made a peace between the boy-troop and him.’

‘One time Eogan Mac Durthacht challenged Ulster to battle. The men of Ulster entered the fray; Cúchulainn was left to his sleep. Ulster was beaten. Conchobor and his son Cúscraid Menn Macha, the Stammerer, were left for dead with others in heaps about them. Their wailing woke him. As he woke he stretched, and cracked the two blocks of stone near him. Bricriu, there, saw him do that,’ Fergus said. ‘He got up then and went to the gate of the enclosure. I met him there, in my wounds.’

‘Alas! God help you, friend Fergus,’ he said. ‘Where is Conchobor?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said.

‘So he went out. The night was black. He made for the field of slaughter. He came upon a half-headed man who had half a corpse on his back.

‘Help me, Cúchulainn,’ he said. ‘I am stricken and bear half my brother’s body on my back. Carry it a while for me.’

‘I will not,’ Cúchulainn said.

‘The other threw his burden at him. But he tossed it from him. They reached out at each other. And Cúchulainn was thrown down.

‘Then I heard something: [the Baddb](#) calling from among the corpses: “It’s a poor sort of warrior that lies down at the feet of a ghost!” Cúchulainn reached up and knocked off the half-head with his hurling-stick and drove it before him, playing ball across the plain of battle.

‘Is my friend Conchobor on this battlefield?’

‘Conchobor made answer. Cúchulainn went toward the cry and found him in a trench, with earth piled up on all sides hiding him.

‘What brings you here to the field of slaughter?’ Conchobor said. ‘To learn what mortal terror is?’

He pulled him up from the ditch. No six of the strongest Ulstermen among us could pull so hard.

“Go before me to that house there,” Conchobor said, “and light me a fire.”

‘He kindled a great fire for him.

“Good, so far,” Conchobor said. “Now if I got a cooked pig I might come back to life.”

“I’ll go and get one,” Cúchulainn said.

‘He went out. He came upon a man by a cooking-pit in the middle of the wood, who held his weapons in one hand and cooked a boar with the other. He was a man of terrible ferocity. But Cúchulainn attacked him and took his head as well as the pig.

‘Conchobor swallowed the boar.

“Back now to our house,” Conchobor said.

‘They found Cúscraid, Conchobor’s son, on the way. He lay there heavy with wounds. Cúchulainn lifted him on his back. Then all three made for Emain Macha.’

‘Another time, the men of Ulster were in their pangs. This affliction,’ Fergus said ‘never came to our women or our youths. or anyone not from Ulster — and therefore not to Cúchulainn or his father. None dared shed the blood of Ulstermen in this state. If they did, the pangs themselves would fall on them, or else decay, or a short life.

‘Twenty-seven marauders came from the islands of Faichi. They broke into the rear enclosure as we lay in our pangs. The women there started screaming. The boytroop heard their screams from the field of play and ran toward them. But when they saw those dark men the boy-troop took to flight, all but Cúchulainn. He attacked them with throwing-stones and his hurling-stick and killed nine of them, though they left him with fifty wounds. Then the remainder made off. What wonder that the man who did these deeds before he was five years old should cut off the heads of those four?’

‘Indeed we know the boy,’ Conall Cernach said. ‘And I not the least; I fostered him. It wasn’t long after what Fergus has told that he did another deed.

‘It happened that Culann the Smith was getting ready to entertain Conchobor. He asked him not to bring too great a company, for he had no land or property to provide the feast, only what he earned by his tongs and his two hands. So Conchobor set out with only fifty chariot-fulls of the highest and mightiest of his champions to accompany him.

‘First he visited the playing-field. It was his habit always, going and coming, to greet the boys and have their blessing. So it was that he saw Cúchulainn playing ball against three times fifty boys and beating them.

‘When they played Shoot-the-Goal it was Cúchulainn who filled the hole with his shots and they were helpless against him. When it was their turn to shoot at the hole, all together, he turned them aside single-handed and not one ball got in. When it was time to wrestle he overthrew by himself the whole three fifties of them: and there wasn’t room around him for the number needed to throw him. When they played the Stripping-Game he stripped them all stark naked. They couldn’t even pluck the brooch from his cloak.

‘Conchobor was amazed at this. He asked would there be the same difference in their deeds when they came to manhood. They all said there would. Conchobor said to Cúchulainn:

“Come with me,” he said. “You will be a guest at this feast we are going to.”

“I haven’t had my fill of play yet, friend Conchobor,” the boy said. “I’ll follow you.”

‘Later when they had all arrived at the feast, Culann said to Conchobor:

“Is there anybody still to come after you?”

“No,” Conchobor said, forgetting the arrangement that his foster-son was to follow them.

“I have a savage hound,” Culann said. “Three chains are needed to hold him, with three men on each chain. Let him loose,” he ordered, “to guard our cattle and other stock. Shut the gate of the enclosure.”

‘Soon the boy arrived and the hound started out for him. But he still attended to his game: he tossed his ball up and threw his hurling-stick after it and struck it; the length of his stroke never varied. Then he would cast his javelin after both, and catch it before it fell. His game never faltered though the hound was tearing toward him. Conchobor and his people were in such anguish at this that they couldn’t stir. They were sure they couldn’t reach him alive, even if the enclosure gate was open. The hound sprang. Cúchulainn tossed the ball aside and the stick with it and tackled the hound with his two hands: he clutched the hound’s throat-apple in one hand and grasped its back with the other. He smashed it against the nearest pillar and its limbs leaped from their sockets. (According to another version he threw his ball into its mouth and so tore out its entrails.)

‘Then the Ulstermen rose up to meet him, some of them over the rampart, others through the gate of the enclosure. They carried him to Conchobor’s bosom. They gave a great cry of triumph, that the son of the king’s sister had escaped death.

‘Culann stood in his house.

“You are welcome, boy, for your mother’s heart’s sake. But for my own part I did badly to give this feast. My life is a waste, and my household like a desert, with the loss of my hound! He guarded my life and my honour,” he said; “a valued servant, my hound, taken from me. He was shield and shelter for our goods and herds. He guarded all our beasts, at home or out in the fields.”

“That doesn’t matter,” the boy said. “I’ll rear you a pup from the same pack. Until that hound grows up to do his work, I will be your hound, and guard yourself and your beasts. And I will guard all Murtheimne Plain. No herd or flock will leave my care unknown to me.”

“Cúchulainn shall be your name, the Hound of Culann,” Cathbad said.

“I like that for a name!” Cúchulainn said.

‘What wonder that the man who did this at the end of his sixth year should do a great deed at the present time when he is full seventeen?’ Conall Cernach said.

‘There was another deed he did,’ Fiacha Mac Fir Febe said. ‘Cathbad the druid was staying with his son, Conchobor mac Nesa. He had one hundred studious men learning druid lore from him — this was always the number that Cathbad taught.

‘One day a pupil asked him what that day would be lucky for. Cathbad said if a warrior took up arms for the first time that day his name would endure in Ireland as a word signifying mighty acts, and stories about him would last forever.

‘Cúchulainn overheard this. He went to Conchobor and claimed his weapons. Conchobor said:

“By whose instruction?”

“My friend Cathbad’s,” Cúchulainn said.

“We have heard of him,” Conchobor said, and gave him shield and spear. Cúchulainn brandished them in the middle of the house, and not one piece survived of the fifteen sets that Conchobor kept in store for new warriors or in case of breakage. He was given Conchobor’s own weapons at last, and these survived. He made a flourish and saluted their owner the king and said:

“Long life to their seed and breed, who have for their king the man who owns these weapons.”

‘It was then that Cathbad came in and said:

“Do I see a young boy newly armed?”

“Yes,” Conchobor said.

“Then woe to his mother’s son,” he said.

“What is this? Wasn’t it by your own direction he came?” Conchobor said.

“Certainly not,” Cathbad said.

“Little demon, why did you lie to me?” Conchobor said to Cúchulainn.

“It was no lie, king of warriors,” Cúchulainn said. “I happened to hear him instructing his pupils this morning south of Emain, and I came to you then.”

“Well,” Cathbad said, “the day has this merit: he who arms for the first time today will achieve fame and greatness. But his life is short.”

“That is a fair bargain,” Cúchulainn said. “If I achieve fame I am content, though I had only one day on earth.”

‘Another day came and another druid asked what that day would be lucky for.

“Whoever mounts his first chariot today,” Cathbad said, “his name will live forever in Ireland.”

Cúchulainn overheard this also, and went to Conchobor and said:

“Friend Conchobor, my chariot!”

‘A chariot was given to him. He clapped his hand to the chariot between the shafts, and the frame broke at his touch. In the same way he broke twelve chariots. At last they gave him Conchobor’s chariot and that survived him.

‘He mounted the chariot beside Conchobor’s charioteer. This charioteer, Ibor by name, turned the chariot round where it stood.

“You can get out of the chariot now,” the charioteer said.

“You think your horses are precious,” Cúchulainn said, “but so am I, my friend. Drive round

Emain now, and you won't lose by it."

"The charioteer set off.

"Cúchulainn urged him to take the road to the boytroop, to greet them and get their blessing in return. After this he asked him to go further along the road. Cúchulainn said to the charioteer as they drove onward:

"Use your goad on the horses now."

"Which direction?" the charioteer said.

"As far as the road will take us!" Cúchulainn said.

"They came to Sliab Fuait. They met Conall Cernach there — for to Conall Cernach had fallen the care of the province boundary that day. Each of Ulster's heroic warriors had his day on Sliab Fuait, to take care of every man who came that way with poetry, and to fight any others. In this way everyone was challenged and no one slipped past to Emain unnoticed.

"May you prosper," Conall said. "I wish you victory and triumph."

"Conall, go back to the fort," Cúchulainn said, "and let me keep watch here a little."

"You would do for looking after men of poetry," Conall said. "But you are a little young still for dealing with men of war."

"It might never happen at all," Cúchulainn said. "Let us wander off, meanwhile," he said, "to view the shore of Loch Echtra. Warriors are often camped there."

"It is a pleasant thought," Conall said.

"They set off. Suddenly Cúchulainn let fly a stone from his sling and smashed the shaft of Conall Cernach's chariot.

"Why did you cast that stone, boy?" Conall said.

"To test my hand and the straightness of my aim," Cúchulainn said. "Now, since it is your Ulster custom not to continue a dangerous journey, go back to Emain, friend Conall, and leave me here on guard."

"If I must," Conall said.

"Conall Cernach wouldn't go beyond that point.

"Cúchulainn went on to Loch Echtra but found no one there. The charioteer said to Cúchulainn that they ought to go back to Emain, that they might get there for the drinking.

"No," Cúchulainn said. "What is that peak there?"

"Sliab Mondairn," the charioteer said.

"Take me there," Cúchulainn said.

"They travelled on until they got there. On arriving at the mountain, Cúchulainn asked:

"That white heap of stones on the mountain-top, what is it called?"

"The look-out place, Finncarn, the white cairn," the charioteer said.

"That plain there before us?" Cúchulainn said.

"Mag mBreg, Breg Plain," the charioteer said.

"In this way he gave the name of every fort of any size between Temair and Cenannos. And

he recited to him also all fields and fords, all habitations and places of note, and every fastness and fortress. He pointed out at last the fort of the three sons of Nechta Scéne, who were called Foill (for deceitfulness) and Fannall (the Swallow) and Tuachell (the Cunning). They came from the mouth of the river Scéne. Fer Ulli, Lugaid's son, was their father and Nechta Scéne their mother. Ulstermen had killed their father and this is why they were at enmity with them.

"Is it these who say," Cúchulainn said, "that they have killed as many Ulstermen as are now living?"

"They are the ones," the charioteer said.

"Take me to meet them," Cúchulainn said.

"That is looking for danger," the charioteer said.

"We're not going there to avoid it," Cúchulainn said.

'They travelled on, and turned their horses loose where bog and river met, to the south and upstream of their enemies' stronghold. He took the spancel-hoop of challenge from the pillar-stone at the ford and threw it as far as he could out into the river and let the current take it — thus challenging the ban of the sons of Nechta Scéne.

'They took note of this and started out to find him.

'Cúchulainn, after sending the spancel-hoop downstream, lay down by the pillar-stone to rest, and said to his charioteer:

"If only one man comes, or two, don't wake me, but wake me if they all come."

'The charioteer waited meanwhile in terror. He yoked the chariot and pulled off the skins and coverings that were over Cúchulainn, trying not to wake him, since Cúchulainn had told him not to wake him for only one.

'Then the sons of Nechta Scéne came up.

"Who is that there?" said one.

"A little boy out in his chariot today for the first time," the charioteer said.

"Then his luck has deserted him," the warrior said. "This is a bad beginning in arms for him. Get out of our land. Graze your horses here no more."

"I have the reins in my hand," the charioteer said.

Then Ibor said to the warrior:

"Why should you earn enmity? Look, the boy is asleep."

"A boy with a difference!" cried Cúchulainn. "A boy who came here to look for fight!"

"It will be a pleasure," the warrior said.

"You may have that pleasure now, in the ford there," Cúchulainn said.

"You would be wise," the charioteer said, "to be careful of the man who is coming against you. Foill is his name," he said. "If you don't get him with your first thrust, you may thrust away all day."

"I swear the oath of my people that he won't play that trick on an Ulsterman again when my friend Conchobor's broad spear leaves my hand to find him. He'll feel it like the hand of an outlaw!"

‘He flung the spear at him, and it pierced him and broke his back. He removed the trophies, and the head with them.

“Watch this other one,” the charioteer said. “Fannall is his name, and he treads the water no heavier than swan or swallow.”

“I swear he won’t use that trick on an Ulsterman again,” Cúchulainn said. “You have seen how I foot the pool in Emain.”

‘They met in the ford, and he killed the man and took away the trophies and the head.

“Watch this next one advancing against you,” the charioteer said. “Tuachell is his name, and he wasn’t named in vain. He has never fallen to any weapon.”

“I have the *del chliss* for him, a wily weapon to churn him up and red-riddle him,” Cúchulainn said.

‘He threw the spear at him and tore him asunder where he stood. He went up and cut off his head. He gave the head and trophies to his charioteer.

‘Then a scream rose up behind them from the mother, Nechta Scéne. Cúchulainn lifted the trophies off the ground and brought the three heads with him into the chariot, saying:

“I won’t let go of these trophies until we reach Emain Macha.”

‘They set out for Emain Macha with all his spoils. Cúchulainn said to his charioteer:

“You promised us great driving. We’ll need it now after our fight, with this chase after us.”

They travelled onward to Sliab Fuait. So fleet their haste across Breg Plain, as he hurried the charioteer, that the chariot-horses overtook the wind and the birds in flight, and Cúchulainn could catch the shot from his sling before it hit the earth.

‘When they got to Sliab Fuait they found a herd of deer before them.

“What are those nimble beasts there?” Cúchulainn said.

“Wild deer,” the charioteer said.

Cúchulainn said:

“Which would the men of Ulster like brought in, a dead one or a live one?”

“A live one would surprise them more,” the charioteer said. “It isn’t everyone who could do it. Every man there has brought home a dead one. You can’t catch them alive.”

“I can,” Cúchulainn said. “Use your goad on the horses, over the marsh.”

‘The charioteer did so until the horses bogged down. Cúchulainn got out and caught the deer nearest to him, the handsomest of all. He lashed the horses free of the bog and calmed the deer quickly. Then he tethered it between the rear shafts of the chariot.

‘The next thing they saw before them was a flock of swans.

“Would the men of Ulster prefer to have these brought in alive or dead?” Cúchulainn said.

“The quickest and the most expert take them alive,” the charioteer said.

‘Cúchulainn immediately flung a little stone at the birds and brought down eight of them. Then he flung a bigger stone that brought down twelve more. He did this with his feat of the stunning-shot.

“Gather in our birds now,” Cúchulainn said to his charioteer. “If I go out to them this wild

stag will turn on you.”

“But it’s no easier if I go,” the charioteer said. “The horses are so maddened that I can’t get past them. I can’t get over the two iron rims of the chariot wheels, they are so sharp. And I can’t get past the stag; his antlers fill all the space between the chariot’s shafts.”

“Step out onto the antlers,” Cúchulainn said. “I swear the oath of Ulster’s people, I’ll turn my head on him with such a stare, I’ll fix him with such an eye, that he won’t dare to stir or budge his head at you.”

‘He did this. Cúchulainn tied the reins and the charioteer gathered up the birds. Then Cúchulainn fastened the birds to the cords and thongs of the chariot. It was in this manner that they came back to Emain Macha: a wild stag behind the chariot, a swan-flock fluttering above, and the three heads of Nechta Scéne’s sons inside the chariot.

‘They came to Emain.

“A man in a chariot advancing upon us,” cried the watcher in Emain Macha. “He’ll spill the blood of the whole court unless you see to him and send naked women to meet him.”

‘Cúchulainn turned the left chariot-board toward Emain in insult, and he said:

“I swear by the oath of Ulster’s people that if a man isn’t found to fight me, I’ll spill the blood of everyone in this court.”

“Naked women to him!” Conchobor said.

‘The women of Emain went forth, with Mugain the wife of Conchobor mac Nesa at their head, and they stripped their breasts at him.

“These are the warriors you must struggle with today,” Mugain said.

‘He hid his countenance. Immediately the warriors of Emain seized him and plunged him in a vat of cold water. The vat burst asunder about him. Then he was thrust in another vat and it boiled with bubbles the size of fists. He was placed at last in a third vat and warmed it till its heat and cold were equal. Then he got out and Mugain the queen gave him a blue cloak to go round him with a silver brooch in it, and a hooded tunic. And he sat on Conchobor’s knee, and that was his seat ever after.

‘What wonder,’ Fiacha mac Fir Febe said, ‘that the one who did this in his seventh year should triumph against odds and beat his match today, [when he is fully seventeen years old?](#)’

V ‘DEATH DEATH!’

‘WELL’ Ailill said, ‘let us be off.’ They went to Mag Muceda, the Pigkeeper’s Plain. and there Cúchulainn cut down an oak tree in their path and cut an ogam message into its side. He wrote there that no one was to pass that oak until a warrior had leaped it in his chariot at the first attempt. So they pitched their tents and set themselves to leaping the tree in their chariots. Thirty horses fell on that spot, and thirty chariots were smashed there, and the place has been called Belach nAne ever since, the Pass where they Drove.

They waited there until morning. Then Fraech mac Fidaig was called and Medb said to him:

‘Fraech, we need your help to clear this nuisance away. Go and find Cúchulainn and challenge him.’

Early in the morning he went out with nine others, and they came to Ath Fuait. They saw the boy there, washing in the river.

‘Wait here,’ Fraech said to his followers. ‘I’ll attack him there in the water; he isn’t good in water.’

He stripped off his clothes and went up to him in the water.

‘If you came any nearer,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘I would have to kill you, and that would be a pity.’

‘All the same, I’m coming to meet you in the water,’ Fraech said. ‘You’ll have to fight.’

‘Choose your style of combat then,’ Cúchulainn said.

‘Each to keep one arm round the other,’ Fraech said.

They grappled a long time in the water until Fraech went under. Cúchulainn pulled him up again.

‘Now,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘will you let me spare you?’



‘I wouldn’t have that said,’ Fraech said.

Cúchulainn thrust him down once more and Fraech perished. [Ath Froich is the name of that ford still](#). After he had been laid on the dry land, his followers carried his body to the camp and the whole company lamented the warrior Fraech. Then they saw [a troop of women in green tunics](#) gather about the body of Fraech mac Fidaig and bear him away into the *síd*. *Síd Froich* is the name of the hill since that time.

Then Fergus leaped in his chariot across the oak tree.

Some say they went from here to Ath Meislir, where Cúchulainn slew six of the host, Meslir and the others. Others say they went to Ath Taiten and that the six Cúchulainn slew were six Dúngals of Irros.

They left then for Fornocht, the Naked Place. Medb had a young hound. Its name was

Baiscne. Cúchulainn slung a stone at it and took off its head. The place where this happened is called **Druim Baiscne** since that time, the Ridge of Baiscne.

‘Shame on you all,’ Medb said, ‘not to be out after this pestering demon that is killing you all!’

They took off in pursuit of him then, until their chariot shafts broke. Next day they crossed a high place, Cúchulainn roaming ahead of them.

At the place called Tamlachtaí Orláim, Orlám’s Burial Mark, a little to the north of the sanctuary Dísert Lochait, Cúchulainn came upon a charioteer cutting wood-shafts. He was Orlám’s charioteer; Orlám was a son of Ailill and Medb. Some say that the shaft of Cúchulainn’s own chariot had broken, and that he also was cutting out a new one when he saw Orlám’s charioteer.

‘This is madness,’ Cúchulainn said, **thinking it was an Ulster warrior**. ‘Are there Ulstermen here, with an attacking army coming up behind them?’

He went up to stop the charioteer. He watched him for a while cutting out wood for a chariot-shaft.

‘What are you doing here?’ Cúchulainn said.

‘Getting chariot-shafts,’ the charioteer said. ‘We smashed our chariots chasing that wild deer Cúchulainn. Help me with them,’ he said. ‘Would you rather cut out the shafts or do the trimming?’

‘I’ll do the trimming,’ Cúchulainn said.

Then, under the other’s eyes, he stripped the hollyshafts through his clutched fist, paring them clean, knot and bark. The charioteer said in fright:

‘This isn’t your usual work.’

‘Who are you?’ Cúchulainn said.

‘Orlám’s charioteer. He is a son of Ailill and Medb. And who are you?’ the charioteer said.

‘Cúchulainn,’ he said.

‘Alas!’ the charioteer said.

‘You needn’t worry,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘Where is your master?’

‘He is over there by the dike,’ the charioteer said.

‘Come with me, now,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘I have no quarrel with charioteers.’

Cúchulainn went up to Orlám and slew and beheaded him, and shook the head at the host. He set the head on the charioteer’s back and said:

‘Take this with you and keep it like that all the way into the camp. If you do anything but exactly what I say you’ll get a shot from my sling.’

The charioteer went up close to the camp and took the head from his back, and told Medb and Ailill his story.

‘This isn’t like catching birds,’ she said.

‘And he told me,’ the charioteer said, ‘that if I didn’t take it on my back all the way into the camp **he’d break my head with a stone**.’

Orlám's charioteer was standing at this time between Ailill and Medb [outside the camp](#). Cúchulainn hurled a stone at him, shattering his head so that the brains spattered the ears. His name was Fertedil. It is not true, therefore, that Cúchulainn didn't kill charioteers; he killed them if they did wrong.

The three sons of Gárach were waiting at the ford which now bears their name, Ath meic Gárach. These are their names: Lon, Ualu and Diliu — the blackbird, the prideful, the torrent. The three charioteers were there also, the three foster-sons, Meslir, Meslaech and Meslethan. They couldn't bear the thought of Cúchulainn killing two foster-sons of the king, and a son by blood, and shaking the head at the host. They planned to kill Cúchulainn themselves and lift the scourge from the army. Three shafts of aspen were cut for their charioteers so that all six could go against him together, thus breaking the rule of fair fight. But he slew them all.

Cúchulainn swore an oath in Methe that from this time on, whenever he laid eyes on Ailill and Medb, he would hurl a sling-stone at them. It was then he shot a slingstone south across the ford and killed Medb's squirrel as it sat close to her neck. Hence comes Méthe Tog, Squirrel Neck, as the name of that place. He killed also a pet bird perching close to Ailill's neck; from which comes Ath Méthe nEuin, or Bird Neck Ford. Others say that the bird and the little squirrel were both perched on Medb's shoulders when their heads were torn off by the slingstones. At this time also [Reuin](#) was drowned in the lake now called after him.

'He can't be far off,' Ailill said one time to his sons, the Maine. They rose up, looking about them. As they were settling down again, Cúchulainn struck one of them, shattering his head.

'That was a fine way to rise against him,' Maenén the jester said, 'after all your boasting! I would have knocked his head off.'

At which a stone from Cúchulainn shattered his head also. The following, then, is the list of the slain: Orlám, firstly, on the hill that bears his name; Fertedil between two protectors; the three sons of Gárach on their ford; and Maenén on his hill.

'I swear by the god of my people,' Ailill said, 'I'll cut in two any man who scoffs at Cúchulainn from now on. Let us be off now, travelling day and night,' he said, 'until we get to Cuailnge. The man will kill two thirds of our army if he goes on like this.'

Then the magical sweet-mouth harpers of Caín Bile came out from the red cataract at Es Ruaid, to charm the host. But the people thought that these were spies from Ulster coming among them, and they gave chase after them until they ran in the shape of deer far ahead of them to the north among the stones at Liac Mór, they being druids of great knowledge.

Lethan stood at the ford on the river Níth in Conaille, [in a rage at what Cúchulainn had done](#), and waited for him. But Cúchulainn cut off his head and left it with the body. The ford on the Níth is named [Ath Lethan](#) from this. In [the previous ford](#) so many chariots were shattered in the fighting that it is still called Ath Carpat, Ford of Chariots. On the shoulder of land that lies between these fords, Mulca, Lethan's charioteer, fell. Hence its name is Guala Mulchai,

Mulcha's Shoulder. In this manner, as the armies crossed Breg Plain, he sent men continually to their graves.

Now it was that [the Morrigan](#) settled in bird shape on a standing stone in Temair Chuailnge, and said to the Brown Bull:

‘Dark one are you restless
do you guess they gather
to certain slaughter
the wise raven
groans aloud
that enemies infest
the fair fields
ravaging in packs
learn I discern
rich plains
softly wavelike
baring their necks
greenness of grass
beauty of blossoms
on the plains war
grinding heroic
hosts to dust
cattle groans the Badb
the raven ravenous
among corpses of men
affliction and outcry
and war everlasting
raging over Cuailnge
death of sons
death of kinsmen
death death!’



Thereupon the Bull moved to Sliab Cuilinn with his fifty heifers and his herdsman Forgaimen driving him. He threw off the three times fifty boys who always played on his back, killing two thirds of them, and he tore up a trench through the land of Marcéni in Cuailnge, [tossing the earth back over him with his heels](#).

From the gloomy waters of Saili Imdorchi, in the district of Conaille, until they reached Cuailnge, Cúchulainn killed no one, being then at Sliab Cuinciu. There he swore again that whenever he caught sight of Medb he would hurl a sling-stone at her head. This was no easy thing to do, for Medb never went about unless she was protected by half her army holding a barrelshaped shelter of shields over their heads. One of Medb's bondmaids named Lochu went to fetch water, surrounded by a troop of many women, and Cúchulainn mistook her for Medb. He shot two stones at her from Cuinciu and killed her on the plain in the place known as Réid Locha, Lochu's level ground, in Cuailnge.

VI FROM FINNABAIR CHUAILNGE TO CONAILLE

IT IS SAID in one version of the tale that the armies divided at Finnabair in Cuailnge and laid waste the country with fire. They rounded up all the women and boys and girls and cattle in Cuailnge and brought them to Finnabair.

‘You haven’t done well enough yet,’ Medb said. ‘I don’t see the bull with you.’

‘There is no trace of him anywhere in the province,’ they said.

One of Medb’s herdsmen, **Lóthar**, was summoned.

‘Where do you think the bull might be?’ she said.

‘I tremble to tell you,’ the herdsman said, ‘but on the same night that the men of Ulster were laid low by their pangs, he left with all his three score heifers. He is now in Dubchoire, the Black Cauldron, in Glenn Gat of the Osiers.’

‘Make yourselves ready,’ Medb said. ‘Take a shackle of osiers between each pair of you, and catch him.’

They did as she said, and hence the name of this place is Glenn Gat, the Valley of Osiers. They encircled the bull there and drove him toward Finnabair. And there he saw the cowherd **Lóthar** and attacked him in a fury, taking out his entrails on the horns. He attacked the camp with his three score heifers, and fifty heroes perished in his path. Then the bull vanished out of the camp and, to their shame, no one could say where he had gone. **Medb asked the herdsmen** where the bull might be.

‘He is back in the fastnesses of Sliab Cuilinn.’

They headed for that place, ravaging Cuailnge as they went, but they couldn’t find the bull there.

It is further said, in this version, that the river Cronn rose up against them to the height of the treetops and they had to pass the night by the edge of the water. In the morning Medb ordered some of her followers across it. The famous warrior Ualu tried it. To cross the river he shouldered a big flagstone so that the water wouldn’t force him backward. But the river overwhelmed him, stone and all, and he drowned. His grave, with his stone, is on the roadway by the river; Lia Ualonn is its name, Ualu’s Flagstone. **It is there that Cúchulainn killed Cronn and Caemdele** in heroic fury; and a further hundred warriors died as they struggled, together with Roan and Roae, the two chroniclers of the Táin. **Some say that this is the reason the tale of the Táin was lost and had to be found again long afterward.** One hundred and twenty-four kings died by his hand at the same river.

So they went upward along the river Cronn until they reached its source. They were crossing between the spring and the mountain-summit when Medb called them back. She chose to cross the summit itself and mark their track forever as a mark of dishonour to Ulster. It took them three days and three nights, tearing up the earth before them, to form the gap Bernas Bó Cuailnge.

Then they went over Bernas Bó Cuailnge with all their cattle and belongings and they

passed the night in Glenn Dáilimda in Cuailnge, at the place now called Botha after the huts they made there. Next day they travelled to the river Colptha. Recklessly they tried a crossing, but it too rose against them and bore off a hundred of their charioteers toward the sea. Cluain Carpat, the Chariot-Meadow, is the name of the place where they drowned. They had to move along the river Colptha up to its source, then to Bélat Aliuin. They passed the night between Cuailnge and Conaille at Liasa Liac, so named because the armies built stone shelters for their calves there. After this they went across Glenn Gatlach, but the river Gatlach rose up against them also. Previously it was called Sechaire, but it is known as the river Gatlach since that time, after the osiers they carried their calves in. They spent the night in Druim Féne in Conaille. Such, then, according to one version were their travels from Cuailnge to Conaille Plain.

However, other writers of this tale, and other books, treat events differently from the dividing up of the armies at Finnabair to the arrival in Conaille. Thus, when all had brought their spoils back with them to Finnabair in Cuailnge, Medb said:

‘Divide up the armies. Our forces can’t all advance on the one road. Ailill can take half of them by the Midluachair road. We’ll go with Fergus by way of Bernas Bó Ulad.’

‘That leaves us the difficult half of the army,’ Fergus said. ‘We’ll have to cut a gap to get the cattle over the mountain.’

That is what they did, and such is the origin, says this author, of the name Bernas Bó Ulad.

It is at this time that Ailill took his charioteer Cuillius aside.

‘Watch Medb and Fergus today for me. I don’t know why they are so intimate and I want you to find me some sign.’

Then Cuillius found the couple together at Cluithre, where they had lingered behind as the army moved on. Cuillius moved closer. They didn’t hear him spying on them. It happened that Fergus’s sword was laid down close by him. Cuillius drew it out of its sheath, leaving the sheath empty. Then he went back to Ailill.

‘Well,’ Ailill said.

‘Well indeed,’ Cuillius said. ‘Here is your sign. I discovered them sleeping together as you thought.’

‘Fair enough,’ Ailill said, and they grinned at each other. ‘It is all right,’ Ailill said. ‘She is justified. She does it to keep his help on the Táin. Now, keep the sword in good order. Put it under your chariot-seat with a piece of linen around it.’

Meanwhile Fergus was looking about for his sword.

‘This is terrible,’ he said.

‘What is wrong?’ Medb said.

‘The wrong I have done Ailill,’ Fergus said. ‘Wait here. I must go into the wood. Don’t be surprised if I am gone a while.’

Medb didn’t understand that his sword had vanished. He left her, taking his charioteer’s sword with him, and cut a wooden sword from a tree. This is how Fid Mórthruaille, the Wood of the Great Scabbard, in Ulster, got its name.

‘Let us get back to our companions,’ Fergus said.

All the armies met in the plain and made camp. Ailill sent for Fergus to play *fidchell* with him. When Fergus entered the tent Ailill started laughing at him.

Fergus said:

‘Better be laughed at
 mad after the act
my sword top maddened
 Macha’s curse quick doom
Galeóin swords outcry
 women unvanquished
dark driven to meet them
 spear flock sword flock
among leaders of armies
 on Nes’s boy’s hill
armies struggle in fury
 men’s severed necks.’

Ailill said:

‘Why so wild
 without your weapon
on heights of a certain
 royal belly
in a certain ford
 was your will worked
or your heroism
 an empty shout
to Medb’s oaths
 tribes of men
can bear witness
 sucked dry in the struggle
with giddy women
 crawling entering
battling with great
 murky deeds
under cover
 everywhere.

‘Now sit down,’ Ailill said, ‘and we will play *fidchell*. You are very welcome.

‘You play *fidchell* and *buanbach*
 with a king and queen

ruling the game
 their eager armies
in iron companies
 all around them
not even if you win
 can you take my place
I know all
 about queens and women
I lay first fault
 straight at women's
own sweet swellings
 and loving lust
valorous Fergus
 coming and going
with cattle bellowings
 and huge forces
all over Finnabair's
 rich places
in kingly form
 with fire of dragon
hiss of snake
 blow of lion
thrusting out in front
 Roech's son Fergus
grandson of Rus
 the king of kings.'

They began their game of *fidchell*, advancing the gold and silver men over the bronze board.

Ailill said:

'It isn't right
 that death should take
this sweet slight king
 on the coppery point
the handsomer
 on this mad board
mighty Medb
 the less secure
these wise men
 I move against Fergus
let right be done

as our game goes.'

Medb said:

'Hold a while
your clownish words
don't forget
what still remains
with the gentle boy troop
all might change
a wise judge
bears no grudge
have no more
to do with those
who keep their cattle
with a vengeance
men's eyes downcast
and Fergus cleared.'

Fergus said:

'A pity friend
we hack each other
with sharp words
in the public gaze
right speech offends
right ways run wrong
javelins wiped
kings killing kings
at a great man's word.'

They stayed there that night. Next morning Ailill spoke:

'One warrior out
before huge armies
by Nes's Cronn water
his deeds loosed
at the men of Connacht
men's blood floods
from hacked necks
great men's deaths
dark driven to meet
waves mounting up
where the beardless hero
comes from Ulster.'

Medb said:

‘Don’t call down violence
mighty Mac Mata
chariot onslaughts
from rocky heights
men massing
women carried off
cattle before them
and the heads of armies
swords smashed
on either side
men’s deeds of battle
wrought in the murk
oxen driven
women stolen
great armies turning
from the battle plain
of Cuailnge
now the army sleeps.’

Fergus said:

‘Huge heads stuck
on chariot prow
and gibbet face
great hearted heroes
will swear by their people
squabble over queens
forge at the foe.’

Medb said:

‘As you have said
so let it be
let it be so
he bends to your yoke
hordes are marching
Ailill’s power
put in your hands
to what effect.’

They moved onward as far as the Cronn river. Maine, one of Ailill’s sons, spoke to them:

‘Send me out swiftly
mother father

fair deeds done
 for the horned herds
stand fast till I get
 in chariot reach
away from the herds
 and the battle field
in mighty acts
 is swept clean.'

Fergus said:

'Mighty son
 don't venture out
it is only asking
 to have your head
knocked from your neck
 by the boy with no beard
who comes from the heights
 howls on the plain
summons up rivers
 shakes the woods
wrenches into shapes
 mighty acts
men in great numbers
 drowned in the waters
Ailill hurt
 and Medb mocked
faces cast down
 in the bristling battle.

'Let me travel ahead with the exiles,' Fergus said, 'to make sure there is no foul play against the boy. Send the cattle in front and the armies after us, and the women in the rear.'

Then Medb said:

'On your soul and oath
 Fergus listen
guard these cattle
 with your good armies
in conquering rage
 halt the men of Ulster
or a roar will rise
 on the Plain of Ai
rise overcome
 and we'll meet again

on the army's track.'

Fergus said:

'Spare us Medb
your shameless talk
and harassment
in the public gaze
no limp soft son
was ever mine
at the struggle in Emain
I'll strike my people
no more blows
let me out
from under your weight
no man come breathing
down my neck
to do your work
on another outing.'

At a ford on the Cronn river Cúchulainn came to meet them.

'Laeg, my friend,' he said to his charioteer, 'the army is upon us.'

The charioteer said:

'I swear to the gods
I'll do great deeds
before these warriors
driving to triumph
at full force
on slender steeds
with yokes of silver
and golden wheels
to crush kings' heads
my driven steeds
will take us leaping
to victory.'

Cúchulainn said:

'Now friend Laeg
set our course headlong
into the crush
for Macha's great triumph

let them stray like women
on the plain in terror
the teams' heads set
against Ailill and Medb
through two armies
like placid herds
grinding among them
our vengeful path.

'I summon the waters to help me,' Cúchulainn said. 'I summon air and earth; but I summon now above all the Cronn river:

'Let Cronn itself fall-to in the fight
to save Murtheimne from the enemy
until the warrior's work is done
on the mountain-top of Ochainé.'

And the water reared up to the treetops.

Then the Maine, son of Ailill and Medb, went out before all. Cúchulainn slew him in the ford and thirty **horsemen** of his company were overwhelmed with him. Later Cúchulainn slew another thirty-two warriors in the water.

They pitched their tents at this ford. Lugaid mac Nois Allchomaig went out with thirty horsemen to talk with Cúchulainn.

'Lugaid, I bid you welcome,' Cúchulainn said. 'If a flock of wild birds were grazing on Murtheimne Plain now, I'd give you one and share another; if the salmon were swimming the weirs or river-mouths now **I'd give you one and share another**, with the three proper herbs: cress of the stream, marshwort and sea-herb. And I would stand for you in the ford of battle.'

'I believe you, beloved son,' Lugaid said. 'I wish you a wealth of followers.'

'You have a fine army,' Cúchulainn said.

'You could hold them single-handed,' Lugaid said.

'If it was one by one the army came against me, your Ulster enemy wouldn't disgrace you, Lugaid,' Cúchulainn said. 'I have right and might to sustain me. Friend Lugaid,' he said, 'do the hosts fear me?'

'I swear by the gods,' Lugaid said, 'they daren't make water in ones or twos outside the camp, but have to go in twenties and thirties.'

'I have something new for them,' Cúchulainn said. 'I am taking up sling-throwing. Tell me now, Lugaid, what you want.'

'That you will spare my own men,' Lugaid said.

'You have my promise, provided you point them out to me by a sign. And tell my friend Fergus to show a sign among his men too. And tell the healers to show themselves by a sign — but they must swear to watch over my life and send me food every night.'

Lugaid returned. He found Fergus in Ailill's tent and he called him out and told him the news.

Then they heard Ailill:

‘What are you whispering
this is no sportfield
for our great army
he chooses among us
for the sake of Roech's son
who plays king in our place
as we hear tell
though we get great help
through Medb's sweet needs
let us take our few men
to the favoured tents
and all be safe
from flying flagstones
and hurtling sods
by these secret meetings
I know he is near.’

‘I swear by the gods I can't promise that without asking the boy again,’ Lugaid said.

‘Lugaid,’ Fergus said, ‘[will you do this for me](#)? Go and ask him to let me take Ailill and his troop of three thousand among my own men. Bring an ox, a salt pig and a barrel of wine with you.’

Lugaid went and asked him.

‘It is all the same to me where he goes,’ Cúchulainn said.

So the two troops mingled together and they stayed so for the night — or for twenty nights, or thirty, as some say. But even so Cúchulainn destroyed thirty of Ailill's warriors with his sling.

‘Things are growing worse for you,’ Fergus said. ‘The men of Ulster will soon rise from their pangs, and then they'll grind you to grit and gravel. Besides, this is a bad place to fight.’

He set out then [toward Cúil Airthir, in the east](#).

Cúchulainn slew thirty warriors at Ath Duirn, the Ford of the Fist, and they couldn't reach Cúil Airthir until night came. Cúchulainn slew thirty more of them there before they pitched their tents. In the morning Ailill's charioteer Cuillius was washing the bands of his chariotwheels in the ford and [Cúchulainn struck him with a stone and killed him](#); from which comes the name Ath Cuillne, the Ford of Cuillius in Cúil Airthir. They pressed on then, reaching Druim Féne in Conaille for the night — and that is the second version of how they reached that place.

VII SINGLE COMBAT

CUCHULAINN continued to harass them there. He slew a hundred men on each of the three nights they stayed in that place, plying the sling on them from the hill Ochainne nearby.

‘At this rate,’ Ailill said, ‘our army will melt away at his hands. Bring Cúchulainn this offer: I to give him a part of Ai Plain equal to the whole plain of Murtheimne, with the best chariot to be found at Ai, and harness to equip a dozen men. Or offer him, if he would like it more, his native plain, with twenty-one bondmaids and compensation for anything of his — cattle or household goods — that we have destroyed. He for his part to take service under me, who am more worthy of him than the half-lord he serves now.’

‘Who will take this message?’

‘Mac Roth there.’ (Mac Roth could circle the whole of Ireland in one day.)

Mac Roth set out to Delga with the message from Ailill and Medb; it is there in Delga that Fergus thought Cúchulainn might be found. [A heavy snow fell that night](#), that turned all the provinces of Ireland into a snow-white plain.



‘There is a man coming,’ Laeg said to Cúchulainn. ‘He has a linen band round his yellow hair. He grasps a wrathful club. An ivory-hilted sword hangs at his waist. A red-embroidered hooded tunic is wrapped around him.’

‘Which of the kings’ warriors is he?’ Cúchulainn said.

‘A dark, good-looking, broad-faced man, with a bronze brooch in his handsome brown cloak, a tough triple shirt next his skin, and a pair of well-worn shoes between his feet and the ground. He holds a peeled hazel-wand in one hand and a single-edged sword with guards of ivory in the other.’

‘Those are the marks of a herald,’ Cúchulainn said.

Mac Roth asked Laeg whose servant in arms he was.

‘That man’s there,’ Laeg said.

Cúchulainn was squatting haunch-deep in the snow, stripped and picking his shirt. Mac Roth asked him whose servant in arms he was.

‘I serve Conchobor mac Nesa,’ Cúchulainn said.

‘Can you say no clearer than that?’

‘It’s clear enough,’ Cúchulainn said.

‘Where can I find Cúchulainn?’ Mac Roth said.

‘What have you to say to him?’ Cúchulainn said.

Mac Roth gave him the full message.

‘If Cúchulainn were here he wouldn’t sell his mother’s brother for another king.’

Mac Roth came to Cúchulainn again and said they would give him the noblest women and all the milkless cattle out of their plunder if he would stop using his sling against them at night — he might kill as he chose by day.

‘I can’t agree to that,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘for if you take away the bondwomen our freewomen will have to take to the grinding-stones, and if you take away our milch cows we would have to go without milk.’

Mac Roth came to Cúchulainn again, and said they would leave him instead the bondwomen and the milch cows.

‘I can’t agree to that either,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘for the men of Ulster would sleep with the bondwomen and beget slavish sons, and they would use the milch cows for meat in the winter.’

‘Is there anything that will do?’ the messenger said.

‘There is,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘but I won’t say what it is. If you can find anyone who knows what I mean, I’ll agree to it.’

‘I know what he has in mind,’ Fergus said, ‘and indeed it bodes you no good. This is his plan: that he will fight you one by one in the ford, and that no cattle will be taken from the ford for a day and a night [after each combat. This plan will gain time for him](#) until help comes from the men of Ulster — and I am surprised,’ Fergus said, ‘that they are so long recovering from their pangs.’

‘It will be easier on us, no doubt,’ Ailill said, ‘to lose one man every day than a hundred every night.’

Fergus went to Cúchulainn therefore with the proposal. He was followed by Etarcomol, son of Eda and Léthrenn, a foster-son of Ailill and Medb.

‘I would rather you didn’t come,’ Fergus said. ‘Not that I dislike you, but for fear of strife between Cúchulainn and you. With your pride and insolence, and the other’s ferocity and grimness, force, fury and violence, no good can come from your meeting.’

‘Can I not be under your protection?’ Etarcomol said.

‘Yes,’ Fergus said, ‘but only if you don’t insult him while he is talking.’

They went to Delga in two chariots.

It happened that Cúchulainn was playing *buanbach* with Laeg. Cúchulainn was facing away from them and Laeg facing toward them.

‘I see two chariots coming,’ Laeg said. ‘In the first chariot there is a great dark man. His

hair is dark and full. A purple cloak is wrapped about him, held by a gold brooch. He wears a red-embroidered hooded tunic. He carries a curved shield with a scalloped edge of light gold and a stabbing-spear bound around from its neck to its foot. There is a sword as big as a boat's rudder at his thigh.'

'A big empty rudder,' Cúchulainn said. 'That is my friend Fergus and it isn't a sword, but a stick, he has in his scabbard. I have heard that Ailill caught him off guard when he slept with Medb, and stole his sword and gave it to his charioteer to keep. A wooden sword was put in the scabbard.'

Fergus came up.

'Welcome, friend Fergus,' Cúchulainn said. 'If the salmon were swimming in the rivers or river-mouths I'd give you one and share another. If a flock of wild birds were to alight on the plain I'd give you one and share another; with a handful of cress or sea-herb and a handful of marshwort; and a drink out of the sand; and myself in your place in the ford of battle, watching while you slept.'

'I believe you,' Fergus said, 'but it isn't for food we came here. We know the style you keep.'

Then Cúchulainn heard Fergus's message, and Fergus left. Etarcomol stayed, staring at Cúchulainn.

'What are you staring at?' Cúchulainn said.

'You,' Etarcomol said.

'You could take that in at a glance,' Cúchulainn said.

'So I see,' Etarcomol said. 'I see nothing to be afraid of — no horror or terror or the grinding of multitudes. You're a fine lad, I would say, for graceful tricks with wooden weapons.'

'You are making little of me,' Cúchulainn said, 'but for Fergus's sake I won't kill you. If you hadn't his protection, you would have had your bowels ripped out by now and your quarters scattered behind you all the way from your chariot to the camp.'

'You needn't threaten me any more,' Etarcomol said. 'I'll be the first of the men of Ireland to come against you tomorrow under this fine plan of single combats.'

And he went off.

He turned at Methe and Cethe, and said to his charioteer:

'I have sworn in front of Fergus,' he said, 'to fight Cúchulainn tomorrow, but I can't wait so long. Turn the horses round from this hill again.'

Laeg saw this and said to Cúchulainn:

'The chariot is coming back. He has turned the left chariot-board against us.'

'I can't refuse that,' Cúchulainn said. 'Drive down to the ford to him, and we will see.'

'It's you who want this,' Cúchulainn said to Etarcomol. 'It isn't my wish.'

'You have no choice,' Etarcomol said.

Cúchulainn cut the sod from under his feet. He fell flat, with the sod on his belly.

‘Go away now,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘I don’t want to wash my hands after you. I’d have cut you to pieces long ago but for Fergus.’

‘I won’t leave it like this,’ Etarcomol said. ‘I’ll have your head, or leave you mine.’

‘It will be the latter for sure.’

Cúchulainn poked at the two armpits with his sword and the clothes fell down leaving the skin untouched.

‘Now clear off!’ Cúchulainn said.

‘No,’ Etarcomol said.

Then Cúchulainn sheared off his hair with the swordedge as neat as a razor, leaving the skin unscratched. But the stubborn fool persisted and Cúchulainn struck down through the crown of his head and split him to the navel.

Fergus saw the chariot passing him with only one man in it and he went back in fury to Cúchulainn.

‘Demon of evil,’ he said, ‘you have disgraced me. You must think my cudgel is very short.’

‘Friend Fergus, don’t rage at me,’ Cúchulainn said.

‘You ran from Ulster
with no sword to your fame
and menace me
like a rival or foe
I honour mighty men
but vain Etarcomol
bent under my yoke
gave up death flowers
stretched in my strength
on the chariot cushion
sleeping or eating
my heroic hard hand
never at rest
don’t chide friend Fergus.’

And he stooped humbly while Fergus’s chariot circled him three times.

‘Ask Etarcomol’s charioteer was I at fault,’ Cúchulainn said.

‘You were not, truly,’ the charioteer said.

‘Etarcomol swore,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘he wouldn’t leave until he had my head or left me his own. Which would you say was easier, friend Fergus?’ Cúchulainn said.

‘I think it was easier to do what you did,’ Fergus said. ‘He was arrogant.’

Fergus pierced Etarcomol’s two heels with a spancelring and dragged him behind his chariot to the camp. When they were travelling over rocky ground the halves of the body split

apart; when it was level the halves joined again. Medb saw this.

‘That is brutal treatment for the unfortunate dog,’ Medb said.

‘I say he was an ignorant whelp,’ Fergus said, ‘to pick a fight with the irresistible great Hound of Culann.’

Then they dug a grave for him; his memorial stone was planted, his name written in ogam, and his lamentation made.

Cúchulainn murdered no more that night with his sling.

‘What man have you to go against Cúchulainn tomorrow?’ Lugaid said.

‘Maybe tomorrow we can tell,’ Maine, Ailill’s son, said.

‘We can find no one to go against him,’ Medb said. ‘Ask him for a truce while we look for someone.’

He agreed to this.

‘Where can we turn?’ Ailill said, ‘to find an opponent for Cúchulainn.’

‘He has no match in Ireland,’ Medb said, ‘unless Cúroi mac Dáiri comes, or the warrior Nadcranntail.’

There was one of Cúroi’s people in the tent.

‘Cúroi won’t come,’ he said. ‘He has done enough in sending his men here.’

‘Send a message to Nadcranntail then.’

Maine Andoe, the swift one, set out to bring the news to Nadcranntail.

‘For the honour of Connacht come with us.’

‘I will not,’ he said, ‘unless they give me their daughter Finnabair.’

He went back with them and his weapons were carried in a wagon from eastern Connacht to the camp.

‘You can have Finnabair,’ Medb said, ‘if you go against that man there.’

‘I’ll do it,’ he said.

Lugaid went to Cúchulainn that night.

‘The news is bad. Nadcranntail will be coming against you tomorrow. You’ll never resist him.’

‘We’ll see,’ Cúchulainn said.

Nadcranntail left the camp the next morning and took nine spears of holly with him, charred and sharpened. Cúchulainn was there before him in the distance catching birds, with his chariot nearby. Nadcranntail let fly a spear at Cúchulainn. Cúchulainn toyed in mid-air with the point of the spear and his bird-catching never faltered. Likewise with the other eight spears. As the ninth spear was flung the flock of birds flew away from Cúchulainn and he sped off in pursuit. Birdlike, he stepped from point to point of the flying spears in his haste not to let the birds escape. But to everyone it seemed that Cúchulainn sped in flight before Nadcranntail.

‘Look at your Cúchulainn there,’ Nadcranntail said. ‘He has run away.’

‘And why not?’ Medb said. ‘A true warrior came, and a cowardly sprite vanished.’

Fergus and the men of Ulster were troubled by this, and Fiacha mac Fir Febe went to Cúchulainn to protest.

‘Tell him,’ Fergus said, ‘it was a noble stand while he showed his bravery before men. But it would be better to hide now after fleeing from one man. He shames Ulster as well as himself.’

‘Who is boasting of my flight?’ Cúchulainn said.

‘Nadcranntail,’ Fiacha said.

‘What is there to boast about? The feat I did before him is nothing to be ashamed of,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘If he had been carrying real weapons he wouldn’t be boasting now; you know I don’t kill unarmed men. Let him come tomorrow,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘between the hill Ochaine and the sea. As early as he wishes he’ll find me waiting, with no question of flight.’

So Cúchulainn went to their meeting-place and watched through the night. In the morning he flung a cloak about himself and also, without noticing it, about a great standing stone nearby, as big as himself. He came with it wrapped between his body and his cloak, and it settled upright beside him. Then Nadcranntail came, *with his weapons in their wagon*.

‘Show me Cúchulainn,’ he said.

‘There he is,’ Fergus said.

‘He seems different from yesterday,’ Nadcranntail said. ‘Are you really Cúchulainn?’

‘What if I am?’ Cúchulainn said.

‘If you are,’ Nadcranntail said, ‘how can I take a little lamb’s head back to the camp? I can’t behead a beardless boy.’

‘I’m not the one,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘You’ll find him behind that hill.’

Cúchulainn ran to Laeg.

‘Make me a false beard. I can’t get this warrior to fight me unless I have a beard.’

Laeg did as he asked, and Cúchulainn went to meet Nadcranntail on the hill.

‘This is more like him,’ Nadcranntail said. ‘A fight with rules!’

‘Agreed,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘Name your rules.’

‘Thrown spears,’ Nadcranntail said, ‘and no dodging.’

‘No dodging,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘except upward!’

Nadcranntail made a cast at him but Cúchulainn leaped on high and it struck the standing stone and shattered in two.

‘You have fought foul! You have dodged my throw,’ Nadcranntail said.

‘You are free to dodge mine by leaping upward,’ Cúchulainn said.

Then he let fly his spear, but he threw it up on high so that it dropped down into Nadcranntail’s skull and pinned him into the earth, and Nadcranntail cried:

‘Misery! Misery!’

Then he said:

‘You are the best warrior in Ireland. I have twentyfour sons in the camp. Let me go and tell them about this treasure you’ve hidden in me, and I’ll come back to be beheaded. If this spear is taken out of my head I will die.’

‘Agreed,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘But come back.’

Nadcranntail made his way back to the camp. They all came to meet him asking:

‘Where is the head of the Warped One?’

‘Warriors, you will have to wait. I have things to tell my sons. Then I go back to the fight with Cúchulainn.’

In a while he made toward Cúchulainn again and flung his sword at him. Cúchulainn leaped on high. Then he swelled with fury as when he faced the boy-troop in Emain. He sprang onto the rim of Nadcranntail’s shield and struck his head off. He struck Nadcranntail again through the neck, down to the navel, so that he fell in four sections to the ground. Then Cúchulainn chanted:

‘Nadcranntail is no more.
The fight grows furious.
I could meet at this moment
a third of Medb’s men.’

VIII THE BULL IS FOUND. FURTHER SINGLE COMBATS. CUCHULAINN AND THE MORRIGAN

THEN with a third of her force, Medb set out into the district of Cuib to search for the bull, and Cúchulainn followed. It was her plan to lay waste the lands of the Ulstermen and the Picts along the Midluachair road northward as far as Dun Sobairche.

Cúchulainn caught sight of Buide mac Báin at the head of three score of Ailill’s men, all in cloaks, coming from the direction of Sliab Cuilinn. They had the bull with them, surrounded by fifteen heifers. Cúchulainn went up to them.

‘Where did you get these cattle?’ Cúchulainn said.

‘From that mountain there,’ the leader said.

‘Where are their herdsmen?’ Cúchulainn said.

‘We found only one, and we have him with us,’ the warrior said.

Cúchulainn went to the ford after them in three great strides and spoke again, saying to the leader:

‘What is your name?’

‘One who neither fears nor favours you,’ he said. ‘Buide mac Báin.’

‘Well, Buide, here is a spear for you!’ Cúchulainn said, and he flung a short spear through his armpit, severing one of his livers in two with the spear-point. Hence comes the name Ath Buide, after him who was killed on this ford. But they got the bull into the camp.

It was said at this time that Cúchulainn would be less troublesome if his javelin could be

taken from him. So Ailill's satirist, Redg, was sent to get this javelin from him.

'Give me your javelin,' the satirist said.

'I'll give you any gift but that,' Cúchulainn said.

'Other gifts I don't want,' the satirist said.

Cúchulainn struck him, for refusing what he chose to offer. Then Redg said he would take away Cúchulainn's good name unless he got the javelin. So Cúchulainn flung the javelin at him and it shot through his head.

'Now, that is a stunning gift!' the satirist cried.

So Ath Tolam Sét got its name — the Ford of the Overwhelming Gift. The copper point of the javelin came to rest at a ford further east, and so Umarrith — Where the Copper Came to Rest — is the name of that ford.

The following are those Cúchulainn killed in Cuib: Nathcoirpthe near the trees named after him, Cruithen in the ford that bears his name, the herdsmen's sons at the cairn named after them, Marc on his hillock, Meille on his hill, Badb in his tower and Bogueine in his marsh.

Cúchulainn turned again toward Murtheimne Plain to defend his beloved home. It is there, [as you shall hear in the proper place](#), that he kills the men of Cronech at Focherd when he finds them pitching camp — the ten cup-bearers and the ten warriors.

Medb turned back again from the north after spending a fortnight harassing the province. She had attacked Finnmór, wife of Celtchar mac Uthidir, and taken fifty women from her at the capture of Dún Sobairche in the territory of Dál Riada. Wherever Medb rested her horsewhip in the district of Cuib, the name Bile Medba, Medb's Whip, has remained. Any ford or height she stopped at is called Medb's Ford or Medb's Hill. They all met again at Focherd, Ailill and Medb and the troop that drove the bull. Then that herdsman [who had been captured with the bull](#) tried to make off with it, but they drove [the herd after him](#) into a narrow gap, with the beating of shafts on shields, and there the animals' hooves drove him into the earth. Forgaimen was the cowherd's name and his body is there still, giving that hill its name. They would have rested easy that night [if only a man could be found to withstand Cúchulainn at the ford](#).

They sent for Cú mac Daláth to fight Cúchulainn. When Cú drew blood from a man that man died in nine days at the latest.

'If he kills Cúchulainn, we have won,' Medb said. 'But even if he is killed himself it will still take a burden off our army: it is no pleasure to be near him, sitting, sleeping or feeding.'

Cú went forth, but he drew back when he saw a beardless boy opposing him.

'This is unfitting,' he said. 'You pay my skill a great compliment! If I knew this was the one I had to meet, I would never have come. I'll send him a boy of his own age from among my people.'

'You are mistaken,' Cormac Connlongas said, 'but it isn't surprising. We would count it a triumph if you drove him off.'

'Well, I said I would do it,' Cú said. 'But get ready to leave in the morning early. The killing of this young deer won't delay us.'

He went to meet him early next morning, having told the armies to get ready for departure, that his meeting with Cúchulainn would lighten the journey. It happened that Cúchulainn was trying his special feats of arms — the apple-feat, the feats of the sword-edge and the sloped shield; the feats of the javelin and rope; the body-feat, the feat of Cat and the heroic salmon-leap; the pole-throw and the leap over a poisoned stroke; the noble chariotfighter's crouch; the *gae bolga*; the spurt of speed; the feat of the chariot-wheel and the feat of the shield-rim; the breath-feat; the snapping mouth and the hero's scream; the stroke of precision and the stunning-shot; stepping on a lance in flight, and straightening erect on its point; and the trussing of a warrior.

For the first third of the day, Cúr plied his weapons on Cúchulainn from the shelter of his shield, but couldn't reach him with thrust or cast, Cúchulainn was so intent on his feats. Cúchulainn didn't know that anyone was attacking him until Fiacha mac Fir Febe said to him:

'Watch out for that man attacking you!'

Cúchulainn looked about him, and flung the one apple left in his hand. It flew between the shield-rim and frame and broke out [through the back of the brute's head](#).

Fergus went back along the road toward the host.

'You are bound by your pact now,' he said, 'to wait another day.'

'But not here,' Ailill said. 'Let us go back to our tents.'

Next, Láth mac Dabró was asked, like Cúr, to go against Cúchulainn, and he too fell. And Fergus went back again to remind them of the pact. So they were kept there while Cúr mac Daláth and Láth mac Dabró were killed, and also Foirc mac trí n-Aigneach, descendant of the three Swift Ones, and Srúbgaile mac Eobith. All were slain in single combat. 'Go to the camp, friend Laeg,' Cúchulainn said, 'and ask Lugaid mac Nois Allchomaig who is to come against me tomorrow. Make sure you find out, and give him my greetings.'

Laeg set off.

'You are welcome,' Lugaid said. 'What a luckless man is Cúchulainn in his trouble — one man against the men of Ireland. For it is Ferbaeth goes to meet him tomorrow — may his weapons be cursed! — a comrade of Cúchulainn's and mine. They have promised him Finnabair for it, and kingship over his people.'

Laeg went back to Cúchulainn.

'My friend Laeg doesn't seem very happy with the answer,' Cúchulainn said.

Laeg told him his news.

Now Ferbaeth had been called to Ailill's and Medb's tent and told to sit by Finnabair's side. He was told that he was to have her, and that she had picked him to fight Cúchulainn. They called him their man of strength because he had had the same training with Scáthach as Cúchulainn had. They gave him wine until he was drunk, telling him it was their best out of the only fifty wagonloads they had taken with them. The girl herself handled his portion.

'I don't want all this,' Ferbaeth said. 'Cúchulainn is my foster-brother and sworn to me for ever. Still, I'll meet him tomorrow and hack his head off.'

'So you will,' Medb said.

Cúchulainn sent Laeg to ask Lugaid to come and talk with him, and Lugaid came.

‘So it is Ferbaeth who is to meet me tomorrow,’ Cúchulainn said.

‘Yes,’ Lugaid said.

‘It is a black day,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘I won’t live to see its close. We two are of equal age and alertness. We’ll meet as a perfect match. Greet him for me, friend Lugaid, and tell him it is false heroism to oppose me. Ask him to come and talk with me tonight.’

Lugaid told him this, and Ferbaeth agreed. He went that night with Fiacha mac Fir Febe to renounce his friendship with Cúchulainn. Cúchulainn begged him, by their foster-brotherhood and by their common fosternurse, Scáthach.

‘I can’t,’ Ferbaeth said. ‘I have promised Medb.’

‘Keep your friendship then!’ Cúchulainn said, and left him in a fury. In the glen a piece of split holly drove into Cúchulainn’s foot and its point came out at his knee. He pulled it out.

‘Wait, Ferbaeth, look what I’ve found.’

‘Throw it over here,’ Ferbaeth said.

Cúchulainn flung the holly-spear after Ferbaeth. It pierced the hollow at the back of his head and came out of his mouth in front, and he fell backward in the glen.

‘That was a throw!’ Ferbaeth said.

Some say that this is how Focherd in Murtheimne — the Place of the Throw — got its name. Others say it was Fiacha mac Fir Febe who said: ‘You are throwing sharp today, Cúchulainn,’ and that thus Focherd Murtheimne was named. Ferbaeth died in the glen; hence the name Glenn Firbaith, Ferbaeth’s Glen.

And Fergus was heard chanting :

‘[Ferbaeth, your fool’s foray](#)
has led to a grave in the ground.
Your rage has brought you ruin
and an ending in Cróen Chorann.

This place in Cronech Murtheimne
called Fichi from of old
shall be called Focherd forever,
where you fell, Ferbaeth.

‘Your comrade is fallen,’ Fergus said. ‘[I wonder will you pay for his death tomorrow?](#)’

‘Sometime I must pay,’ Cúchulainn said.

He sent Laeg to see what was the news in the camp, and to find out if Ferbaeth still lived, but Lugaid said:

‘Ferbaeth is dead.’

[And Cúchulainn went and talked with them.](#)

‘Someone else will have to meet him tomorrow,’ Lugaid said.

Ailill said:

‘You’ll get no one unless you use trickery. Give wine to anyone who comes — it will give him courage — and tell him: “This is the last of the wine we took from Cruachan; we wouldn’t like you to have to drink water in our camp.” Then put Finnabair at his right hand and say: “She is yours if you bring us the head of the Warped One.”’

Each night a great warrior was called in and they made him the offer, but each in turn was killed. At last they could find no one to go against him. Then they turned to Láréne mac Nois, brother to Lugaid king of Munster, and a vainglorious man. They gave him the wine and put Finnabair at his right hand. Medb looked at the pair.

‘There is a handsome couple,’ she said. ‘They would make a fine match.’

‘Sure enough,’ Ailill said. ‘He can have her if he brings me the head of the Warped One.’

‘I’ll bring it,’ Láréne said.

Lugaid came up to them.

‘What man have you got for the ford tomorrow?’

‘Láréne,’ Ailill said.

Then Lugaid went and spoke with Cúchulainn. They met at Ferbaeth’s Glen and greeted each other.

‘I am here to talk about Láréne, my mad boastful fool of a brother,’ Lugaid said. ‘They have tricked him now with the same girl. For the sake of our friendship don’t kill him and leave me brotherless. He is only being sent to stir up a quarrel between us two. But I don’t mind if you punish him heavily; he is coming against my wishes.’

Next day Láréne went to meet Cúchulainn, with the girl beside him urging him on. Cúchulainn sprang at him unarmed and took his weapons away roughly. He grasped him in his two hands and ground and rattled him until the dung was forced out of him. The ford grew foul with his droppings. In every direction the air thickened with his dust. Then Cúchulainn flung him into Lugaid’s arms. Ever afterward, for as long as he lived, Láréne couldn’t empty his bowels properly; he was never free from chest-pains; he couldn’t eat without groaning. Yet he is the only man of all who met Cúchulainn on the Táin Bó Cuailnge who escaped him alive — though it was a cruel escape.

Cúchulainn beheld at this time a young woman of noble figure coming toward him, wrapped in garments of many colours.

‘Who are you?’ he said.

‘I am King Buan’s daughter,’ she said, ‘and I have brought you my treasure and cattle. I love you because of the great tales I have heard.’

‘You come at a bad time. We no longer flourish here, but famish. I can’t attend to a woman during a struggle like this.’

‘But I might be a help.’

‘It wasn’t for a woman’s backside I took on this ordeal!’

‘Then I’ll hinder,’ she said. ‘When you are busiest in the fight I’ll come against you. I’ll get under your feet in the shape of an eel and trip you in the ford.’

‘That is easier to believe. You are no king’s daughter. But I’ll catch and crack your eel’s ribs with my toes and you’ll carry that mark forever unless I lift it from you with a blessing.’

‘I’ll come in the shape of a grey she-wolf, to stampede the beasts into the ford against you.’

‘Then I’ll hurl a sling-stone at you and burst the eye in your head, and you’ll carry that mark forever unless I lift it from you with a blessing.’

‘I’ll come before you in the shape of a hornless red heifer and lead the cattle-herd to trample you in the waters, by ford and pool, and you won’t know me.’

‘Then I’ll hurl a stone at you,’ he said, ‘and shatter your leg, and you’ll carry that mark forever unless I lift it from you with a blessing.’

Then she left him.

Lóch mac Mofemis was asked next. They promised him a part of the fine Plain of Ai equal to the Plain of Murtheimne, with war-harness for a dozen men and a chariot worth seven bondmaids. But he thought it beneath him to fight with a boy. He had a brother Long mac Mofemis, and to him in turn they offered the same reward: the girl, the war-harness, the chariot and the land. He fought Cúchulainn and Cúchulainn slew him and he was carried in death up to his brother Lóch. Lóch said that if he could be sure it was a grown man that had killed him, [he would kill him for it](#).

The women called out to Cúchulainn that people in the camp were mocking at him because he had no beard; that it was only reckless men, and not their best warriors, that would fight him; and that it would be better if he made a beard with berry juice. [He did this, to get Lóch to fight him](#). And he plucked a fistful of grass and spoke into it and everyone believed he had a beard.

‘Look,’ the women said, ‘Cúchulainn is bearded. A warrior may fight him now.’

They did this to urge on Lóch, but Lóch said:

‘I won’t fight him for seven days.’

‘We can’t leave him in peace for so long,’ Medb said. ‘Send out a warrior every night to steal up and catch him off guard.’

They did this; a warrior stole out to find him each night, but he killed them all. These are the names of the men who fell there: seven who were named Conall, seven named Aengus, seven named Uargus, seven named Celtre, eight named Fiac, ten named Ailill, ten named Delbath and ten named Tasach. Those were his week’s deeds at Ath Grencha.

Then Medb began to incite Lóch.

‘It is a great shame on you,’ she said, ‘that the man who killed your brother can destroy our army, and you still haven’t gone to fight him. Surely a peppery overgrown elf like him can’t resist the fiery force of a warrior like you. Wasn’t it from the same teacher and foster-mother you both learned your skill?’

Lóch went out to meet him and avenge his brother, satisfied that he was going to meet a

bearded man.

‘Come to the ford upstream,’ Lóch said. ‘I won’t meet you in this foul place where Long fell.’

While Cúchulainn was going to that ford men drove some cattle over.

‘There will be a great trampling across your water here today,’ Gabrán the poet said.

Ath [Tarteisc](#), ‘across your water,’ and Tír Mór Tairtesc, the mainland of Tarteisc, got their names in this way.

The men met there in the ford and fought and struck at each other. As they were exchanging blows an eel flung three coils about Cúchulainn’s feet and he fell back in the ford. Then Lóch set upon Cúchulainn with the sword until the ford was blood-red with his crimson gore.

‘Urge him on!’ Fergus said to his followers. ‘This is a poor spectacle in front of the enemy. Let someone put heart in Cúchulainn or he will die for want of encouragement.’

The venom-tongued Bricriu mac Carbad stood up and started to taunt Cúchulainn.

‘Your strength is withered up,’ Bricriu said, ‘if a little salmon can put you down like this, and the men of Ulster rising out of their pangs. If this is what happens when you meet a tough warrior in arms, it’s a pity you took on a hero’s task, with all the men of Ireland looking on.’

Cúchulainn rose up at this and struck the eel and smashed its ribs. Then, with the thunderous deeds that the warriors did in the ford, the cattle stampeded madly eastward through the army and carried off the tents on their horns. Next a she-wolf attacked Cúchulainn and drove the cattle back westward upon him, but he let fly a stone from his sling and burst the eye in her head. She came in the shape of a hornless red heifer and led the cattle dashing through the fords and pools, so that he cried out:

‘I can’t tell ford from flood!’

He slung a stone at the hornless red heifer and broke her legs beneath her. [So it was that Cúchulainn did to the Morrígan](#) the three things he had sworn. He made this chant:

‘I am alone against hordes.
I can neither halt nor let pass.
I watch through the long hours
alone against all men.

Tell Conchobor to come now.
It wouldn’t be too soon.
Mágach’s sons have stolen our cattle
to divide between them.

I have held them single-handed,
but one stick won’t make fire.
Give me two or three
and torches will blaze!

I am almost worn out

by single contests.
I can't kill all their best
alone as I am.'

Then he fought Lóch with the sword and the *gae bolga* that his charioteer sent him along the stream. He struck him with it up through the fundament of his body — for when Lóch was fighting, all his other parts were covered in a skin of horn.

'Yield to me: leave me space,' Lóch said.

Cúchulainn yielded before him and Lóch fell forward on his face. From this Ath Traigid is named in Tír Mór — the Ford of Yielding. [Then Cúchulainn cut his head off.](#)

A great weariness fell on Cúchulainn. The Morrígan appeared to him in the shape of a squint-eyed old woman milking a cow with three tits. He asked her for a drink and she gave him milk from the first tit.

'Good health to the giver!' Cúchulainn said. [The blessing of God and man on you.](#)

And her head was healed and made whole. She gave him milk from the second tit and her eye was made whole. She gave him milk from the third tit and her legs were made whole.

'You said you would never heal me,' the Morrígan said.

'If I had known it was you [I wouldn't have done it,](#)' Cúchulainn said.

[IX THE PACT IS BROKEN: THE GREAT CARNAGE](#)

ASK Cúchulainn for a truce,' Ailill and Medb said.

Lugaid went to ask him and Cúchulainn granted the truce.

'But have a man at the ford for me tomorrow,' Cúchulainn said.

Now there were six paid soldiers of royal blood in Medb's army, six sons of kings of the Clanna Dedad. They were known as the three Dark-haired Ones of Imlech and the three Red-heads of Sruthar.

'Why shouldn't we go all together against Cúchulainn?' they said.

So they went against him on the next day, and Cúchulainn slew all six.

Medb considered again what to do with Cúchulainn. She was greatly troubled by the number being killed in her army. She decided to ask him to meet her and talk with her at a certain place, and then set a great number of keen and spirited men on him. So she sent her messenger, with a false offer of peace, to find Cúchulainn and get him to meet her at that place next day. He was to come unarmed and she was to go by herself, with only her troop of women in attendance. Traighthén was the messenger — the strong of foot — and he went up to Cúchulainn and gave him Medb's message. Cúchulainn said he would do what she asked.

'Cúchulainn,' Laeg said, 'how do you plan to go to this meeting with Medb tomorrow?'

‘The way Medb asked me,’ Cúchulainn said.

‘Medb is a forceful woman,’ the charioteer said. ‘I’d watch out for her hand at my back.’

‘How should I go?’ Cúchulainn said.

‘With your sword at your side,’ the charioteer said, ‘not to be caught off guard. A warrior without his weapons is not under warriors’ law; he is treated under the rule for cowards.’

‘I’ll do what you say,’ Cúchulainn said.

The meeting was fixed for the hill Ard Aighnech, called Focherd today. Medb came there and set a trap for Cúchulainn with **fourteen of her own most skillful followers**: two named Glas Sinna, two sons of Buccride, two named Ardán, two sons of Lecc, two named Glas Ogma, two sons of Cronn, with Drucht and Delt and Daithen, Tea and Tascur and Tualang, Taur and Glese.

When Cúchulainn came to the meeting place the men rose up against him. Fourteen javelins were hurled at him together but Cúchulainn guarded himself so that his skin was untouched, and even his armour. Then he turned on them and killed all fourteen of them. These are the ‘Fourteen at Focherd,’ who are also remembered as ‘the warriors of Cronech,’ for it was in Cronech near Focherd that they died.

Then Cúchulainn chanted:

‘My skill in arms grows great.
On fine armies cowering
I let fall famous blows.
On whole hosts I wage war
to crush their chief hero
and Medb and Ailill also
who stir up wrong, red hatred
and black woman-wailing,
who march in cruel treachery
trampling their chief hero
and his sage, sound advice
— a fierce, right-speaking warrior
full of noble acts.’

Some believe that the name Focherd comes from the opening words of this chant, ‘Fo ... cherd’— the ‘great skill’ of Cúchulainn there.

Then Cúchulainn fell upon the army as they were settling their camp, and killed two named Dagrí and two named Anle and four named Dúngas from Imlech. Afterward on the same day they again fought him foul. Five went out against him together — two named Cruaid, two named Calad, and Derothor—**and Cúchulainn killed them single-handed**.

Fergus said they must stop breaking the rule of fair fight against Cúchulainn, and Cúchulainn did single combat until they reached Delga in Murtheimne — **at that time called Dún Cinn Coros**. Cúchulainn killed Fota in the field now called by his name, Bómailce on his ford, Salach in his marsh, Muinne on his hill, Luar in Lethbera Luair, and Fertóithle in Tóithli. So

these places are named forever after the men who fell there. Cúchulainn slew Traig and Dornu and Dernu — Foot, Fist and Palm — and Col, Mebul and Eraise — Lust, Shame and Nothingness — on the near side of the ford of Tír Mór at Methe and Cethe; these were **three druids** and their three wives. After this Medb sent out one hundred of her own followers to kill Cúchulainn but he slew them all at the ford of Cét Chuile — the Crime of One Hundred. For it was here that Medb said: ‘A crime, this slaughter of our people!’ From this episode came the names Glais Chrau — the Stream of Blood; Cuilenn Cinn Dúin — the Crime (some say) of Cinn Dúin, the head of the fort; and the Ford of Cét Chuile.

Then he pelted them from where he was in Delga so that no living thing, man or beast, dared show its face past him southward between Delga and the sea.

‘Take this message to him,’ Ailill said: ‘he can have Finnabair if he leaves our armies alone.’

Lugaid went and told Cúchulainn about this offer.

‘Friend Lugaid,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘I don’t trust them.’

‘It is the word of a king,’ Lugaid said. ‘It is no lie,’

‘I accept, so,’ Cúchulainn said.

Lugaid brought Cúchulainn’s answer back to Ailill and Medb.

‘Send the camp fool made up to look like me,’ Ailill said, ‘with a king’s crown on his head. Stand him at a distance from Cúchulainn so as not to be recognised, and send the girl with him. He can betroth her to Cúchulainn and they can come away quickly. Maybe the trick will work and hold him back until the day when he comes with the men of Ulster to **the last Battle**.’

The fool **Tamun** — the Stump — was sent with the girl and he spoke from a distance to Cúchulainn. Cúchulainn went to meet them and knew by the man’s speech that he was the camp fool. He shot a sling-stone from his hand and pierced the fool’s head and knocked out his brains. Cúchulainn went up to the girl and cut off her two long tresses and thrust a pillar-stone under her cloak and tunic. He thrust another pillar-stone up through the fool’s middle. Their two standing-stones are there still, Finnabair’s Pillar-Stone and the Fool’s Pillar-Stone. Cúchulainn left them like that. Some of Ailill and Medb’s people came looking for them because they stayed away so long, and saw their condition, and the story spread through the whole encampment. There was no further truce for them with Cúchulainn after that.

The four provinces of Ireland settled down and camped on Murtheimne Plain, at Breslech Mór (the place of their great carnage). They sent their shares of cattle and plunder southward ahead of them to Clithar Bó Ulad, the Cattle-Shelter of Ulster. Cúchulainn took his place near them at the gravemound in Lerga. At nightfall his charioteer Laeg mac Riangaobra kindled a fire for him. And he saw in the distance over the heads of the four provinces of Ireland the fiery flickering of gold weapons in the evening sunset clouds. Rage and fury seized him at the sight of that army, at the great forces of his foes, the immensity of his enemies. He grasped his two spears, his shield and his sword and he shook the shield and rattled the spears and flourished the sword and gave the warrior’s scream from his throat, so that demons and devils and goblins of

the glen and fiends of the air replied, so hideous was the call he uttered on high. Then the Nemain stirred the armies to confusion. The weapons and spear-points of the four armed provinces of Ireland shook with panic. One hundred warriors fell dead of fright and terror that night in the heart of the guarded camp.

Laeg stood in his place and saw a solitary man crossing between the camp of the men of Ireland straight toward him out of the northeast.

‘There is a man coming toward us alone, Little Hound,’ Laeg said.

‘What kind of man is he?’, Cúchulainn said.

‘It is soon told: a tall, broad, fair-seeming man. His close-cropped hair is blond and curled. A green cloak is wrapped about him, held at his breast by a bright silver brooch. He wears a knee-length tunic of kingly silk, redembroidered in red gold, girded against his white skin. There is a knob of light gold on his black shield. He carries a five-pointed spear in his hand and a forked javelin. [His feats and graceful displays](#) are astonishing, yet no one is taking any notice of him and he heeds no one: it is as though they couldn’t see him.’

‘They can’t, my young friend,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘This is some friendly one of the *side* that has taken pity on me. They know my great distress now on the Táin Bó Cuailnge, alone against all four provinces of Ireland.’

Cúchulainn was right. When the warrior came up to him he said in pity:

‘This is a manly stand, Cúchulainn.’

‘It isn’t very much,’ Cúchulainn said.

‘I am going to help you now,’ the warrior said.

‘Who are you?’ Cúchulainn said.

‘I am Lug mac Ethnenn, your father from the *síde*.’

‘My wounds are heavy. It is time they were let heal.’

‘Sleep a while, then, Cúchulainn,’ the warrior said, ‘a heavy sleep of three days and three nights by the gravemound at Lerga. I’ll stand against the armies for that time.’

He sang to Cúchulainn, in the man-murmur, until he slept. Then he examined each wound and cleaned it. Lug made this chant:

‘Rise son of mighty Ulster
with your wounds made whole
a fair man faces your foes
in the long night over the ford
rest in his human care
everywhere hosts hewn down
succour has come from the *síde*
to save you in this place
your vigil on the hound fords

a boy left on lonely guard
defending cattle and doom
kill phantoms while I kill
they have none to match your span
of force or fiery wrath
your force with the deadly foe
when chariots travel the valleys
then arise arise my son.'

Cúchulainn slept three days and three nights, and well he might; for if his sleep was deep so was his weariness. From the Monday after the feast of Samain at summer's end to the Wednesday after the feast of Imbolc at spring's beginning, Cúchulainn never slept — unless against his spear for an instant after the middle of the day, with head on fist and fist on spear and the spear against his knee — for hacking and hewing and smiting and slaughtering the four great provinces of Ireland.

Then the warrior from the *síde* dropped wholesome healing herbs and grasses into Cúchulainn's aching wounds and several sores, so that he began to recover in his sleep without knowing it.

The boy-troop in Ulster spoke among themselves at this time.

'It is terrible,' they said, 'that our friend Cúchulainn must do without help.'

'Let us choose a company to help him,' Fiachna Fuilech, the Bloodspiller, said — a brother of Fiacha Fialdána mac Fir Febe.

Then the boy-troop came down from Emain Macha in the north carrying their hurling-sticks, three times fifty sons of Ulster kings — a third of their whole troop — led by Follamain, Conchobor's son. The army saw them coming over the plain.

'There is a great number crossing the plain toward us,' Ailill said.

Fergus went to look.

'These are some of the boy-troop of Ulster coming to help Cúchulainn,' he said.

'Send out a company against them,' Ailill said, 'before Cúchulainn sees them. If they join up with him you'll never stand against them.'

Three times fifty warriors went out to meet them, and they all fell at one another's hands at Lia Toll, the Pierced Standing-Stone. Not a soul came out alive of all those choice children except Follamain mac Conchoboir. Follamain swore he would never go back to Emain while he drew breath, unless he took Ailill's head with him, with the gold crown on top. But that was no easy thing to swear; the two sons of Bethc mac Báin, sons of Ailill's foster-mother and foster-father, went out and attacked him, and he died at their hands.



‘Make haste,’ Ailill said, ‘and ask Cúchulainn to let you move on from here. There will be no forcing past him once his hero-halo springs up.’

Cúchulainn, meanwhile, was sunk in his sleep of three days and nights by the gravemound at Lerga. When it was done he rose up and passed his hand over his face and turned crimson from head to foot with a whirling excitement. His spirit was strong in him; he felt fit for a festival, or for marching or mating, or for an ale-house or the mightiest assembly in Ireland.

‘Warrior!’ Cúchulainn said. ‘How long have I been in this sleep?’

‘Three days and three nights,’ the warrior said.

‘Alas for that!’ Cúchulainn said.

‘Why?’ the warrior said.

‘Because their armies were free from attack all that time,’ Cúchulainn said.

‘They were not,’ the warrior said.

‘Tell me what happened,’ Cúchulainn said.

‘The boy-troop came south from Emain Macha, three times fifty sons of Ulster kings, led by Follamain, Conchobor’s son, and they fought three battles with the armies in the three days and nights you slept, and they slew three times their own number. All the boy-troop perished except Follamain mac Conchoboir. Follamain swore to take home Ailill’s head, but that was no easy thing, and he too was killed.’

‘Shame,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘that I hadn’t my strength for this! If I had, the boy-troop wouldn’t have perished as they did and Follamain mac Conchoboir wouldn’t have fallen.’

‘Onward, Little Hound; there is no stain on your good name, no slight on your courage.’

‘Stay with us tonight,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘and we’ll avenge the boy-troop together.’

‘I will not stay,’ the warrior said. ‘No matter what deeds of craft or courage a man does in your company the glory and fame and name go to you, not to him. So I will not stay. Go bravely against the army by yourself. They have no power over your life at this time.’

‘The sickle chariot, friend Laeg,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘can you yoke it? Have you everything needed? If you have, get it ready. If you haven’t, leave it be.’

The charioteer rose up then and donned his charioteer’s war-harness. This war-harness that he wore was: a skinsoft tunic of stitched deer’s leather, light as a breath, kneaded supple and smooth not to hinder his free arm movements. He put on over this his feathery outer mantle, made (some say) by Simon Magus for Darius king of the Romans, and given by Darius to Conchobor, and by Conchobor to Cúchulainn, and by Cúchulainn to his charioteer. Then the charioteer set down on his shoulders his plated, four-pointed, crested battle-cap, rich in colour and shape; it suited him well and was no burden. To set him apart from his master, he placed the charioteer’s sign on his brow with his hand: a circle of deep yellow like a single red-gold strip of burning gold shaped on an anvil’s edge. He took the long horse-spancel and the ornamental goad in his right hand. In his left hand he grasped the steed-ruling reins that give the charioteer control. Then he threw the decorated iron armour-plate over the horses, covering them from head to foot with spears and spit-points, blades and barbs. Every inch of the chariot bristled. Every angle and corner, front and rear, was a tearing-place.

He cast a protecting spell on his horses and his companion-in-arms and made them obscure to all in the camp, while everything remained clear to themselves. It was well he cast such a spell, for he was to need his three greatest charioteering skills that day: leaping a gap, straight steering and the use of the goad.

Then the high hero Cúchulainn, Sualdam’s son, builder of the Badb’s fold with walls of human bodies, seized his warrior’s battle-harness. This was the warlike battleharness he wore: twenty-seven tunics of waxed skin, plated and pressed together, and fastened with strings and cords and straps against his clear skin, so that his senses or his brain wouldn’t burst their bonds at the onset of his fury. Over them he put on his heroic deep battlebelt of stiff, tough, tanned leather from the choicest parts of the hides of seven yearlings, covering him from his narrow waist to the thickness of his armpit; this he wore to repel spears or spikes, javelins, lances or arrows — they fell from it as though dashed at stone or horn or hard rock. Then he drew his silk-smooth apron, with its lightgold speckled border, up to the softness of his belly. Over this silky skin-like apron he put on a dark apron of wellsoftened black leather from the choicest parts of the hides of four yearlings, with a battle-belt of cowhide to hold it. Then the kingly champion gripped his warlike battleweapons. These were the warlike weapons he chose: eight short swords with his flashing, ivory-hilted sword; eight small spears with his five-pronged spear, and a quiver also; eight light javelins with his ivory javelin; eight small darts with his feat-playing dart, the *del chliss*; eight feat-playing shields with his dark-red curved shield that could hold a prize boar in its hollow, its whole rim so razor sharp it could sever a single hair against the stream. When Cúchulainn did the feat of the shield-rim he could shear with his shield as sharply as spear or sword. He placed on his head his warlike, crested

battle-helmet, from whose every nook and cranny his longdrawn scream re-echoed like the screams of a hundred warriors; so it was that the demons and devils and goblins of the glen and fiends of the air cried out from that helmet, before him, above him and around him, whenever he went out to spill the blood of warriors and heroes. His concealing cloak was spread about him, made of cloth from Tír Tairngire, the Land of Promise. It was given to him by his magical foster-father.



The first warp-spasm seized Cúchulainn, and made him into a monstrous thing, hideous and shapeless, unheard of. His shanks and his joints, every knuckle and angle and organ from head to foot, shook like a tree in the flood or a reed in the stream. His body made a furious twist inside his skin, so that his feet and shins and knees switched to the rear and his heels and calves switched to the front. The balled sinews of his calves switched to the front of his shins, each big knot the size of a warrior's bunched fist. On his head the temple-sinews stretched to the nape of his neck, each mighty, immense, measureless knob as big as the head of a month-old child. His face and features became a red bowl: he sucked one eye so deep into his head that a wild crane couldn't probe it onto his cheek out of the depths of his skull; the other eye fell out along his cheek. His mouth weirdly distorted: his cheek peeled back from his jaws until the gullet appeared, his lungs and liver flapped in his mouth and throat, his lower jaw struck the upper a lion-killing blow, and fiery flakes large as a ram's fleece reached his mouth from his throat. His heart boomed loud in his breast like [the baying of a watchdog at its feed](#) or the

sound of a lion among bears. Malignant mists and spurts of fire — the torches of the Badb — flickered red in the vaporous clouds that rose boiling above his head, so fierce was his fury. The hair of his head twisted like the tangle of a red thornbush stuck in a gap; if a royal apple tree with all its kingly fruit were shaken above him, scarce an apple would reach the ground but each would be spiked on a bristle of his hair as it stood up on his scalp with rage. The hero-halo rose out of his brow, long and broad as a warrior's whetstone, long as a snout, and he went mad rattling his shields, urging on his charioteer and harassing the hosts. Then, tall and thick, steady and strong, high as the mast of a noble ship, rose up from the dead centre of his skull a straight spout of black blood darkly and magically smoking like the smoke from a royal hostel when a king is coming to be cared for at the close of a winter day.



When that spasm had run through the high hero Cúchulainn he stepped into his sickle war-chariot that bristled with points of iron and narrow blades, with hooks and hard prongs and heroic frontal spikes, with ripping instruments and tearing nails on its shafts and straps and loops and cords. The body of the chariot was spare and slight and erect, fitted for the feats of a

champion, with space for a lordly warrior's eight weapons, speedy as the wind or as a swallow or a deer darting over the level plain. The chariot was settled down on two fast steeds, wild and wicked, neat-headed and narrow-bodied, with slender quarters and roan breast, firm in hoof and harness — a notable sight in the trim chariot-shafts. One horse was lithe and swift-leaping, high-arched and powerful, long-bodied and with great hooves. The other flowing-maned and shining, slight and slender in hoof and heel.

In that style, then, he drove out to find his enemies and did his thunder-feat and killed a hundred, then two hundred, then three hundred, then four hundred, then five hundred, where he stopped — he didn't think it too many to kill in that first attack, his first full battle with the provinces of Ireland. Then he circled the outer lines of the four great provinces of Ireland in his chariot and he attacked them in hatred. He had the chariot driven so heavily that its iron wheels sank into the earth. So deeply the chariot-wheels sank in the earth that clods and boulders were torn up, with rocks and flagstones and the gravel of the ground, in a dyke as high as the iron wheels, enough for a fortress-wall. He threw up this circle of the Badb round about the four great provinces of Ireland to stop them fleeing and scattering from him, and corner them where he could wreak vengeance for the boy-troop. He went into the middle of them and beyond, and mowed down great ramparts of his enemies' corpses, circling completely around the armies three times, attacking them in hatred. They fell sole to sole and neck to headless neck, so dense was that destruction. He circled them three times more in the same way, and left a bed of them six deep in a great circuit, the soles of three to the necks of three in a ring around the camp. This slaughter on the Táin was given the name Seisrech Bresligi, the Sixfold Slaughter. It is one of the three uncountable slaughters on the Táin: Seisrech Bresligi, Imslige Glennamnach — the mutual slaughter at Glenn Domain — and the Great Battle at Gáirech and Irgairech (though this time it was horses and dogs as well as men.) Any count or estimate of the number of the rabble who fell there is unknown, and unknowable. Only the chiefs have been counted. The following are the names of these nobles and chiefs: two called Cruaid, two named Calad, two named Cír, two named Cíar, two named Ecell, three named Crom, three named Caur, three named Combirge, four named Feochar, four named Furechar, four named Cass, four named Fota, five named Aurith, five named Cerman, five named Cobthach, six named Saxan, six named Dach, six named Dáire, seven named Rochad, seven named Ronan, seven named Rurthech, eight named Rochlad, eight named Rochtad, eight named Rinnach, eight named Coirpre, eight named Mulach, nine named Daithi, nine more named Dáire, nine named Damach, ten named Fiac, ten named Fiacha and ten named Feidlimid. In this great Carnage on Murtheimne Plain Cúchulainn slew one hundred and thirty kings, as well as an uncountable horde of dogs and horses, women and boys and children and rabble of all kinds. Not one man in three escaped without his thighbone or his head or his eye being smashed, or without some blemish for the rest of his life. And when the battle was over Cúchulainn left without a scratch or a stain on himself his helper or either of his horses.



X COMBAT WITH FERGUS AND OTHERS

CUCHULAINN came out the next morning to view the armies and display his noble fine figure to the matrons and virgins and young girls and poets and [bards](#). He came out to display himself by day because he felt the unearthly shape he had shown them the night before had not done him justice. And certainly the youth Cúchulainn mac Sualdaim was handsome as he came to show his form to the armies. You would think he had three distinct heads of hair — brown at the base, bloodred in the middle, and a crown of golden yellow. This hair was settled strikingly into three coils on the cleft at the back of his head. Each long loose-flowing strand hung down in shining splendour over his shoulders, deep-gold and beautiful and fine as a thread of gold. A hundred neat red-gold curls shone darkly on his neck, and his head was covered with a hundred crimson threads matted with gems. He had four dimples in each cheek — yellow, green, crimson and blue — and seven [bright pupils, eyejewels](#), in each kingly eye. Each foot had seven toes and each hand seven fingers, the nails with the grip of a hawk's claw or [a gryphon's clench](#). He wore his festive raiment that day. This is what he wore: a fitted purple mantle, fringed and fine, folded five times and held at his white clear breast by a brooch of light-gold and silver decorated with gold inlays — a shining source of light too bright in its blinding brilliance for men to look at. A fretted silk tunic covered him down to the top of his warrior's apron of dark-red royal silk. He carried a dark deep-red crimson shield — five disks within a lightgold rim — and a gold-hilted sword in a high clasp on his belt, its ivory guard decorated with gold. Near him in the chariot he had a tall grey-bladed javelin with a hard hungry point, rivetted with bright gold. He held in one hand nine human heads and in the other hand ten, and he shook them at the armies — the crop of one night's warfare on the four provinces of Ireland.



The Connacht women climbed on the soldiers, and the Munster women climbed on their own men, to see Cúchulainn. But Medb couldn't see him, not daring to show her face from under the barrel-shaped shelter of shields for dread of him.

'This is a nuisance,' she said. 'I can't see the boy they are making so much of.'

'It would give you no peace to see him,' Léthren, Ailill's groom said.

'Fergus,' Medb said, 'what kind of man is he?'

 'A boy who checks
 sword with shield
for cattle and women
 who makes a division
of men's bodies
 hacked and hacking
in Ulster's fords
 and sweetly shares
the royal spoils

a fierce young man
if he is the Hound
who calls Murtheimne
Plain his own.'

Then Medb herself climbed up on the mens' backs to see him.

Dubthach the Dark, of Ulster, said at this time:

'Is this the Warped One?
We'll have corpses,
shrieks in our enclosures,
[tales to tell](#),

stones over graves,
dead kings increasing.
You may battle this Brave One
but you are lost.

His wild shape I see,
and his heap of plunder —
nine heads in one hand,
and ten more, his treasure.

Your women climb up
and show their faces,
but your great queen shuns
the bitter battle.

If I had my way
all the armies together
[would put an end
to this Warped One!](#)

But Fergus answered:

'Get Dubthach with his black tongue
back behind our army!
Since [the maiden-massacre](#)
he has done only harm.

It was base slaughter when he slew
Conchobor's son Fiacha,
and no better when he killed
Coirpre mac Feidlimid.

Now this son of **Lugaid lags**
in the battle against Ulster.
Those that he can't kill
he sets at each other's throats.

All the exiles would lament
the slaughter of our beardless son.
But soon the Ulster hosts will come
and harass you like herds of cattle
— your councils scattered far and wide
by Ulster risen from its pangs.

There'll be stories of great slaughter
and the crying of great queens.
There'll be mangling of wounds
and mounds made of the slain.

There'll be corpses under foot
and there'll be ravens at their meat
and shields scattered on the slopes
and sorrowing and pillaging

and blood of men in multitudes
poured out over the ground.
We have wandered far indeed
in exile from our Ulster home.'

Then Fergus flung Dubthach from him and he fell motionless near a group of soldiers.

Ailill said:

'Fergus why so fierce
over Ulster cows and women
I can sense great slaughter
and gaps of butchery
though it is one by one
they die in the ford each day.'

Medb said:

'Rise up Ailill

with triple ranks
guard your cattle
the grinning boy
storms in turmoil
by brinks of fords
wide gravel beds
and dark pools
valorous Fergus
and Ulster's exiles
will have their due
when the battle is done
with grief to crush
poets of war.'

Fergus said:

'Pay no heed
to stupid women
flames flowering
kith and kin
buried away
and dire deaths
cool your fever
fight fair.'

The poet Gabrán said:

'Why make a show of words
for queens and followers
to have a taste of fierceness
when it comes to blades in battle
there's one you must pin down
or he will earn our hatred.'

'Don't flinch from him,' Fergus said. 'Go and meet him in the ford.'

'Let us hear from Ailill,' Medb said.

Ailill said:

'Fergus knows this land
he brings shame on your heads
he won't lead your cattle round
but hacks and plunders round them
and swears he doesn't take us
by ways many and long.'

Fergus said:

‘After a year of women
strife and bitter ending
most noble Medb don’t blame
your exile troops too harshly
or make little of the man
who came to your support.’

Fiacha Fialdána, the bold and true, went to speak with his cousin Maine Andoe, the swift. Dóchaé mac Mágach came with Maine Andoe, and Dubthach the Black from Ulster came with Fiacha Fialdána. Dóchaé threw a javelin at Fiacha but hit his own friend Dubthach. Fiacha Fialdána threw a javelin at Dóchaé but hit his kinsman Maine. The place where this happened is called Imroll Belaig Eóin, the Miscast at Bird Pass.

Some say that Imroll Belaig Eóin got its name later, when the Ulstermen had risen from their pangs: that the two armies had arrived and settled at Belach Euin when Diarmait, Conchobor’s son, came south out of Ulster. He said:

‘Send out a horseman. If Maine comes I’ll go to meet him and the two of us can talk.’

So they met.

‘I come from Conchobor,’ Diarmait said, ‘to tell Medb and Ailill to set the cattle free and make good all the damage they have done to us. Let them bring their bull to the bull here in the east **and have them fight, as Medb promised.**’

‘I’ll go and tell them,’ Maine said, and he told them.

‘Medb won’t have it,’ Maine said **when he came back.**

‘We can exchange weapons then, if you like,’ Diarmait said.

‘I don’t mind,’ Maine said.

Each of them threw his javelin at the other and they killed each other. Some say that this is how Imroll Belaig Eóin got its name, and that the armies then rushed upon each other, killing three score out of each force, and that the name Ard in Dirma comes from this — the Armies’ Height.

A brave Ulster warrior, Aengus, son of Aenlám Gaibe, turned the whole army aside **at Muid Loga** — the place called Lugmod today — as far as Ath Da Ferta, the Ford of the Two Grave Mounds. He refused to let them pass, and pelted them with flagstones. Some say that if they had agreed to single combat the whole army would have fallen at his hands **before they came under the sword at Emain Macha.** But there was no rule of fair play for him and he died overwhelmed.

‘Send someone out to me,’ Cúchulainn said at Ath Da Ferta.

‘Not I, not I!’ they all called out from their places. ‘My family owes no sacrifice! And if it

did, why should I be the one?’

Fergus mac Roich was asked to fight him, but he wouldn’t fight his foster-son Cúchulainn. Wine was brought and he grew very drunk. He was asked again to go into combat and this time he went, because they implored him.

‘You must be under strong protection, friend Fergus,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘to come against me [with no sword in your scabbard.](#)’

‘It would be all the same if I had a sword in it,’ Fergus said, ‘I wouldn’t use it on you. Yield to me now, Cúchulainn,’ he said.

‘If you will yield to me another time,’ Cúchulainn said.

‘Agreed,’ Fergus said.

Cúchulainn retreated back before Fergus as far as the swamp of Grellach Dollaid on condition that Fergus would give way to him on the day of the great Battle. Cúchulainn ran off into Grellach Dollaid.

‘Chase him, Fergus!’ they all cried.

‘I won’t,’ Fergus said. ‘It isn’t so easy. That one there is too lively. I’m not going after him until my turn comes round again.’

Then they all went past Cúchulainn and set up camp in Crích Rois.

[Ferchu Loingsech](#) was a Connachtman, who was always harassing and hounding Ailill and Medb. From the day they took the kingship he had never once gone to visit their camp, even when he was in difficulty or dire straits. He was forever pillaging and plundering their border lands when they were away. It happened that he was eastward of Ai Plain with his troop of a dozen men at this time and he heard that four of the provinces of Ireland had been stopped and held from the Monday at summer’s end to the beginning of spring by one man, who killed a man on the ford each day and a hundred men at night. Ferchu discussed this with his people and said:

‘The best thing we can do is attack this man who has stopped and held the four provinces of Ireland, and bring his head and weapons with us back to Ailill and Medb. No matter what crimes we have committed against them, they’ll forgive us if we kill this man.’

They all agreed to this and went to find Cúchulainn. When they found him they fought foul and fell on him all twelve together. But Cúchulainn turned on them at once and struck off their twelve heads. He planted twelve stones for them in the ground and set a head on each stone, and Ferchu Loingsech’s head on its stone as well. It is from this, where Ferchu left his head, that the name Cinnit Ferchon Loingsig comes — reading it ‘Cenn áit’ Ferchon, [the Place of Ferchu’s Head](#).

The next day Medb sent [twenty-nine men](#) out together against Cúchulainn in the swamp of Fuiliarnn — Bloodiron — a swamp on the near side of Ferdia’s Ford. [They were Gaile Dána and](#) his twenty-seven sons, with his sister’s son, Glas mac Delga. The arrangement to do this was made in Fergus’s presence, and he had to agree with it. They argued that it should be

counted a single combat, because the sons of Gaile Dána were all the issue of his body, limb of his limb and flesh of his flesh. Fergus went aside to his tent with his followers and uttered a tired sigh aloud.

‘A sad thing is going to happen here tomorrow,’ he said.

‘What is that?’ his followers asked.

‘The killing of Cúchulainn,’ Fergus said.

‘Alas!’ they said. ‘But who can kill him?’

‘Gaile Dána,’ he said, ‘and his twenty-seven sons and his sister’s son Glas mac Delga. **Every one of them has poison on him**, and there is poison on all their weapons. Any man that they wound will die in nine days at most, if he doesn’t die at once. If anyone will go for me to see this fight and bring me the story of Cúchulainn’s death he can have my weapons and my blessing.’

‘I will go,’ Fiacha mac Fir Febe said.

They stayed there that night. Gaile Dána rose up early in the morning with his twenty-seven sons and his sister’s son Glas mac Delga and they went out to find Cúchulainn. Fiacha mac Fir Febe went out also. Gaile Dána found Cúchulainn and they flung all their twenty-nine spears together. Not one spear went astray, but Cúchulainn did the rim-feat with his shield and all the spears sank half way in the shield. Though they didn’t throw wide, therefore, none of their spears was reddened with his blood. Then Cúchulainn pulled the sword from his Badb’s scabbard to cut away the spears and lighten his shield. They attacked him while he was doing this and aimed their twenty-nine fists together at his head, and struck him and bore him down till his face met the ford’s sandy gravel. He uttered his warrior’s scream on high, and his cry of unfair fight, so that every living man in Ulster heard it, except those that lay asleep. Fiacha leaped from his chariot when he saw their hands all raised against Cúchulainn and he hacked off all twenty-nine hands. Cúchulainn said:

‘That was help in time’s nick!’

‘It wasn’t much,’ Fiacha said. ‘But **the compact is broken now for the Ulster exiles**. If a single one of these gets back to the camp our whole troop of three thousand will go under the edge of the sword.’

‘I swear by the gods,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘that not one of them will get there alive while I draw breath.’

Cúchulainn, **with the two sons of Ficce** — two brave Ulster warriors who had come to try their strength on the armies — slew all twenty-nine. So ended this episode of battle with Cúchulainn on the Táin. On a stone in the middle of the ford there is the mark where the shield was thrown and the marks of their fists and knees. Twentynine standing-stones were erected there for them.



XI COMBAT OF FERDIA AND CUCHULAINN

THEY brooded among themselves on the man who might next protect them from Cúchulainn. The four provinces of Ireland talked and argued back and forth about who should go against him at the ford. They all agreed it should be the horn-skinned warrior from Irrus Domnann, the burden unbearable and the rock fatal in the fray, Cúchulainn's own ardent and adored foster-brother. There was not a feat of Cúchulainn's that he lacked, except the *gae bolga*, and they thought he could avoid that and save himself by means of the stuff of horn he had around him. No weapon, no edge, could pierce it.

Medb sent messengers to Ferdia, but he wouldn't come back with them. Then Medb sent poets and bards and satirists to bring the blushes to his cheek with mockery and insult and ridicule, so there would be nowhere in the world for him to lay his head in peace. In dread of being put to shame by these messengers he came back with them to Medb's and Ailill's tent, where it had been pitched on the Táin. Their daughter Finnabair was put beside him. She handed him the goblets and cups, with three kisses for every cup. And at the neck-opening of her shirt she **offered him certain fragrant sweet apples**, saying that Ferdia was her darling and her chosen beloved of the whole world. When Ferdia was full and in good humour, Medb said:

'Well now, Ferdia, do you know why you were brought to our tent?'

'I know the noblest men in Ireland are here,' Ferdia said. 'Why shouldn't I be here too, as well as these fine warriors?'

'That isn't the reason,' Medb said, 'but to give you a chariot worth three times seven bondmaids, with warharness enough for a dozen men, and a portion of the fine Plain of Ai equal to the Plain of Murtheimne. Also the right to stay forever in Cruachan, with your wine supplied, and your kith and kin free forever from tax and tribute. And this leaf-shaped brooch of mine that was made out of ten score ounces and ten score half-ounces and ten score cross-measures and ten score quarters of gold. And Finnabair, my daughter and Ailill's, for your wife. And my own friendly thighs on top of that if needs be.'

'No need!' they all cried. 'Those gifts and trophies are enough.'

'They are certainly very great,' Ferdia said. 'But great as they are, Medb, I would sooner

leave them with you than go out to fight my own foster-brother.'

'What Cúchulainn said was true, my people,' Medb said, as though she hadn't heard Ferdia. She knew well how to stir up strife and dissension.

'What did he say, Medb?' Ferdia said.

'He said he wouldn't count it any great triumph if his greatest feat of arms were your downfall,' she said.

'He shouldn't have said that. He never knew me slow or sluggish to fight, night or day. I swear by the gods I'll be first at the ford of battle tomorrow morning to fight him.'

'All our blessing! Go and win,' Medb said. 'This is better than being thought sluggish and slow to arms for the sake of some loyalty outside our own people. Is it fitting for him to guard the safety of Ulster because his mother belonged there, but not for you, the son of a king of Connacht, to save the province of Connacht?'

So the promise was made, and they chanted together:

Medb: 'Riches and rings I promise,
a share of woods and plain,
privilege for your kinsfolk
to the end of time.
Does it take your breath away,
Ferdia mac Damáin?
It is yours; accept it
— others have.'

Ferdia: 'Give me some surety.
I'm no hollow hero,
but tomorrow I go to bear
a terrible trial.
Culann's harsh Hound
is not faced lightly.
It could be a stern matter,
a dire disaster.'

Medb: 'That is no trouble.
Pick your own surety
from among kings or princes,
any hostage you wish
— there are men *who can ensure*
whatever you ask.
But I know you will kill

this man when you meet him.'

Ferdia: 'I'll pick six heroes,
six and no less,
before I try my strength
in front of the armies.
Grant me this
and I'll do battle
with the hard Hound,
though I'm not his match.'

Medb: 'Take farmers or soldiers,
or Niaman the slaughterer,
or choose among the bards
and you can have them.
If you so demand
you may have Morann
or Coirpre nia Manann
or our own two sons.'

Ferdia: 'You've a strong tongue, Medb.
Your kind husband's no curb.
There's no doubt you are master
on the mounds of Cruachan!
By your fame and great force,
I'll take the speckled silk,
the gold and the silver
and all you have promised.
Give me six princes
to be my surety
when I go to my doom
with the hard Hound.'

Medb: 'Choicest of champions,
take this round brooch.
Rest now until Sunday,
when the fight is due.
My famous fine warrior,

all shall be given
into your hands
— the world's greatest jewels,
and **queenly Finnabair**,
the heroes' favourite —
when the Hound is finished;
all yours, Ferdia.'

The great Ulster warrior, Fergus mac Roich, was there while they were bargaining. He went to his tent and said:

'There will be a sad deed done tomorrow morning.'

'What is that?' the people in his tent said.

'The slaying of my good foster-son Cúchulainn.'

'Indeed! who is boasting of that?'

'It is soon told: his own beloved fiery foster-brother, Ferdia mac Damáin. Will one of you, in pity for Cúchulainn, go to him with my blessing,' Fergus said, 'and warn him to flee from the ford tomorrow morning?'

'By my soul,' they said, 'we wouldn't go on such an errand, even though you yourself were due in the ford of battle.'

'Very well,' Fergus said. 'Get the horses, my friend, and yoke the chariot.'

The charioteer rose and got the horses and yoked the chariot. They went out to the ford of battle **and found Cúchulainn**. Fergus came up and alighted from his chariot.

'You are welcome, friend Fergus,' Cúchulainn said.

'I believe I am,' Fergus said.

'What do you want here?' Cúchulainn said.

'To tell you the warrior who is coming to fight you tomorrow morning,' Fergus said.

'Tell it. then. Let me hear it,' Cúchulainn said.

'Your own foster-brother Ferdia mac Damáin.'

'I swear I don't want this meeting,' Cúchulainn said. 'Not because I fear him but because I love him so much.'

'You would do well to fear him too,' Fergus said. 'He has a skin of horn on him when he fights that no point or blade can pierce.'

'You needn't worry,' Cúchulainn said. 'If he appears at the ford before me, I swear by the vow of my people that his joints and limbs will bend like reeds in the river at the point of my sword.'

So they spoke together there, and chanted:

Fergus: 'Cúchulainn, you are well met.

It is time you were astir.

Ferdia mac Damáin is coming.
His face is red with rage against you.'

Cúchulainn: 'Here I stand, an obstacle
to all the men of Ireland!
I have stood my ground here
through countless single combats.'

Fergus: 'I don't wish to cause unease,
but — for all your fame, Cúchulainn —
Ferdia wears a horn-skin
that no kind of weapon pierces.'

Cúchulainn: 'When I and skillful Ferdia
fight it out in the ford together
we will know before we're done
who is favoured by the fierce blades.'

Fergus: 'His brave arm is strong with rage.
He holds a blood-reddened sword.
He is strong as a hundred men
and safe from every point or edge.'

Cúchulainn: 'Fergus, with your mighty weapons,
say no more — it is enough.
There are no odds too much for me
in any part of Ireland.'

Fergus: 'Cúchulainn, with your crimson sword,
nothing could please me more
if you carried off the spoils
from Ferdia in his pride.'

Cúchulainn: 'I am not a boastful man
but I swear now — I do not lie —
I will take the victory
from Dáman mac Dáiri's son.'

Fergus: 'When I turned against Ulster
it was to avenge a wrong.

Heroes and war-like men
left their homes to come with me.'

Cúchulainn: 'Only for Conchobor's pangs
you'd have found it harder still.
Medb's journey from Scáil Plain
would have been a trail of tears.'

Fergus: 'The great trial is at hand,
the fight with Ferdia mac Damáin,
with the hard baleful bitter spear,
Hound of Culann, for your share.'

Cúchulainn said:

'Is this the reason you came, Fergus, my friend?'

'It is,' Fergus said.

'It is as well,' Cúchulainn said, 'it was no one else of the men of Ireland came to warn me about a single warrior. All the four provinces of Ireland would have been needed to save him!'
Then Fergus went off to his tent.

'What will you do tonight,' Laeg said to Cúchulainn.

'What do you mean?' Cúchulainn said.

'When Ferdia comes to attack you, he will be washed and bathed, with hair nicely plaited and freshly trimmed, and the four provinces of Ireland will come with him to watch the fight. I think you should go where you will get the same attention, where sweet-haired Emer is waiting in Cairthenn Cluana-Dá-Dam, the Meadow of the Two Oxen, at Sliab Fuait.'

Cúchulainn went there that night and stayed with his wife. No more is said here about that.

[As to Ferdia, he went to his tent](#) and told his followers of the pledge he had given Medb, to wage single combat on Cúchulainn the next day or fight six warriors failing that. He told them of the equal pledge he had got from Medb, to have the same six warriors sent to make sure she fulfilled her promises if he killed Cúchulainn. The people in Ferdia's tent that night were gloomy and oppressed. They felt certain that if these two shafts of battle of the world met together there would be a double downfall: it might even happen that their own lord would fall. For it was no easy thing facing Cúchulainn on the Táin.

Great anxieties weighed on Ferdia's spirit that night and wouldn't let him sleep. Among these was the thought that he might lose the treasures and the girl, in combat with this one man, while if he didn't fight that man next day he would have to fight the six champions. But a greater worry than all was the knowledge that his life and his head would never again be in his own hands if he once appeared at the ford before Cúchulainn.

Ferdia got up early next day.

‘Now, my friend,’ he said, ‘bring our horses and yoke the chariot.’
‘I swear,’ the charioteer said, ‘we’d do better not to take this journey.’
Ferdia talked with his charioteer and encouraged him, and they chanted:

Ferdia: ‘Let us go to do battle
with the man waiting
down at the ford
where the Badb will screech.
Let us meet Cúchulainn.
I’ll pierce his slight body
and pass the spear through him
and bring him death.’

Charioteer: ‘These are cruel threats.
Better stay here
or one will die
— a sudden parting.
You are going to disaster
before all Ulster.
It will long be remembered.
Beware, if you go.

Ferdia: ‘You waste your breath.
Is it warrior’s work
to be shy or meek?
I won’t hold back.
Silence, my friend,
have courage to the end.
Not fearful but firm
let us go to do battle.’

The charioteer got the horses and yoked the chariot and they left the camp.

‘Wait a moment,’ Ferdia said. ‘It isn’t right to leave without bidding farewell to the men of Ireland. Turn the horses and chariot round to face them.’

The charioteer turned the horses and chariot round three times and faced the men of Ireland. He passed close to Medb as she was making water on the floor of the tent.

‘Are you asleep still, Ailill?’ Medb was saying.

‘No,’ Ailill said.

‘Do you hear your new son-in-law bidding you farewell?’

‘Is that what he’s doing?’ Ailill said.

‘It is,’ Medb said, ‘but I swear by the vow of my people that the man making his farewell there won’t be coming back to us on his own feet.’

‘We have done well with the marriage agreement, anyhow,’ Ailill said, ‘if he kills Cúchulainn. It is all the same to us if they both die. Still, it might be better if Ferdia escaped.’

Ferdia proceeded to the ford of battle.

‘See is Cúchulainn at the ford,’ Ferdia said.

‘He isn’t there,’ the charioteer said.

‘Look well,’ Ferdia said.

‘Cúchulainn is not such a little speck that you couldn’t see him if he was there,’ the charioteer said.

‘True enough,’ Ferdia said. ‘But Cúchulainn never had a real warrior, a proper man, come against him on the Táin Bó Cuailnge until today. As soon as he heard us coming he vanished from the ford.’

‘It is a great shame to slander Cúchulainn in his absence,’ the charioteer said. ‘Do you not remember when you were fighting the harsh and grizzled Germán Garblas above the borders of the Tyrrhene Sea, and you left your sword with the enemy army? It was Cúchulainn who killed a hundred warriors to reach it and bring it back to you. Do you remember where we stayed that night?’

‘No,’ Ferdia said.

‘At the house of Scáthach’s steward,’ the charioteer said, ‘and you went before us into the house first, full of pride and haughtiness. The monstrous steward gave you a blow of his three-pronged flesh-fork in the small of the back, and sent you flying out like a stone past the door. Cúchulainn went in and struck the brute a blow of his sword and cut him in two. Then I was your steward while you stayed there. If we could bring that day back, you wouldn’t say you were a better warrior than Cúchulainn.’

‘You did wrong, my friend,’ Ferdia said, ‘not to remind me of this before. I wouldn’t have come looking for this fight. Pull the shafts of the chariot along beside me now, and put the skin covering under my head and let me sleep for a while.’

‘Alas for your rest here,’ the charioteer said, ‘you would sleep as well in the path of a stag hunt!’

‘Why, boy? Can you not keep watch for me?’

‘I can,’ the charioteer said. ‘I’ll see them and give warning before they arrive, from east or west — unless they come at you out of the clouds and mists.’

The chariot-shafts were pulled along by his side, and the skin covering put under his head, but he couldn’t sleep, even a little.

Cúchulainn was saying meanwhile:

‘Well, friend Laeg, bring the horses, yoke the chariot. If Ferdia is waiting he must be wondering what keeps us.’

The charioteer got up and brought the horses and yoked the chariot. Cúchulainn got into the

chariot and they pressed on toward the ford. Ferdia's charioteer wasn't watching long when he heard the creaking of the chariot as it drew near. He woke his master and made this chant:

'I hear a chariot creaking.
I see its yoke of silver
and the great trunk of a man
above the hard prow.

The shafts jut forward,
they are approaching us
by the place of the tree-stump,
triumphant and proud.

There's a skilled Hound at the helm,
a fine chariot-warrior,
a wild hawk hurrying
his horses southward.

Surely it is Cúchulainn's
chariot-horses coming.

Who says he is not
coming to our defeat?

I had a dream last year:
whoever, at the time appointed,
opposes the Hound on the slope,
let him beware.

The Hound of Emain Macha,
in all his different shapes,
the Hound of plunder and battle
— I hear him, and he hears.'

'How does Cúchulainn look?' Ferdia said to his charioteer.

'He and his charioteer look as if all the men of Ireland meant nothing to them,' he said.

'Enough, my friend,' Ferdia said, 'you praise him too much. Get my weapons ready to meet him at the ford.'

'I feel if I turned my head his chariot-shafts would stick in my neck!'

'Why do you praise Cúchulainn so much?' Ferdia said. 'He hasn't paid you anything.'

Then he chanted:

'It's your help I need now,
not this false friendship.
Enough of your praises.

We're all the same dead!
Let Cuailnge's great warrior
come in his glory.
We'll dispose of him
and cut him down.'

Charioteer: 'When Cuailnge's great warrior
travels in his glory
it will be here, toward us,
not away in flight.
Give praise where it is due.
Shrewdly, not slyly,
he is hurrying toward you
— a thunderclap!'

Ferdia: 'There'll be blows between us!
You haven't stopped praising him
since we set out.
Why do you favour him?
Even as they challenge him
everyone praises him.
But a sorry lot so far
has gone to meet him.'

They met in the middle of the ford not long after that [and Ferdia said to Cúchulainn](#):
'You are welcome, Cúchulainn.'

'I could trust your welcome once,' Cúchulainn said, 'but I don't trust it now. Anyway,' he said, 'it is for me and not you, Ferdia, to bid welcome: this is my homeland, you are the intruder. And you are wrong to challenge me to combat. It would suit me better to challenge you: you have driven out our women and young men and boys, and our troops of horses, our herds and our flocks and all our goods.'

'Enough, Cúchulainn,' Ferdia said. 'What brings you at all to meet me in this war-like combat? When we were with Scáthach and Uathach and Aife, you were only my body-servant, who fixed my spears and made my bed.'

That is true,' Cúchulainn said, 'but I did it then because I was young and small. You can't call me that now. There isn't a warrior in the world now that I'm not able for.'

Then each bitterly reproached the other and they broke off their friendship and Ferdia chanted, with Cúchulainn answering:

'What brings you here, [Squinter](#),

to try my strength!
Through the steam of your horses
I'll reach and redden you.
You'll regret you came.
You're a fire without fuel.
You'll need plenty of help
if you ever see home.'

Cúchulainn: 'Like a great boar
before his herd,
I'll overwhelm you
before these armies.
I'll push you and punish you
to the last of your skill,
and then bring down
havoc on your head!'

Ferdia: 'It is I who will kill,
I who will destroy,
I who will drive
Ulster's hero to flight
before all eyes.
By my doing
they'll rue their loss
early and late.'

Cúchulainn: 'Must we start our fight
groaning over corpses?
Come what may
let us enter the ford
to meet death before the hosts
with bloody spear-blade
or the savage sword
if our time is come.'

Ferdia: 'Attack then, if we must.
Before sunset and nightfall
I'll fight you at Bairche

in bloody battle.
Men of Ulster will cry out:
“Death has seized you!”
The terrible sight
will pierce them through.’

Cúchulainn: ‘You have reached your doom,
your hour is come.
My sword will slash
and not softly.
When we meet you will fall
at a hero’s hands.
Never again
will you lead men.’



Ferdia: ‘Little bush, you have boasted
and threatened enough.
You’ll find no mercy
or victory here.
I know you well —
a clumsy and feeble
chicken-hearted
trembling boy.’

Cúchulainn: ‘While we stayed with Scáthach
we went as one,
with a common courage,
into the fight.
My bosom friend
and heart’s blood,
dear above all,
I am going to miss you.’

Ferdia: ‘You make much of yourself,
but the fight is to come.
I’ll have spiked your head
when the cock crows.
Cúchulainn of Cuailnge
has lost his wits
and will suffer for it.
The guilt is yours.’

‘Ferdia, you did wrong to come fighting with me,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘It is only Ailill and Medb’s ill-doing and meddling. It has gone badly with all who came against me — I killed them all. And it can do you no good. You too will fall.’

He spoke further and Ferdia listened:

‘Ferdia son of Damán,
noble warrior, do not come.
You will suffer more than me
and bring sorrow to your company.

Do not come — and in the wrong —
or here you’ll find your resting-place.
How can it be that [you alone](#)

could escape my fatal rage?

I'll overwhelm you with my feats
—despite your horn-skin and red rage.
Son of Dáman, you'll never have
the girl that you are boasting of.

Medb's daughter Finnabair,
for all the fairness of her form
and all the sweetness of her shape,
will never yield to your assault.

Finnabair, the royal daughter
—she is nothing but a snare.
She played false with the others
and ruined them as she ruins you.

Don't break our friendship and our bond,
don't break the oath we made once,
don't break our promise and our pledge.
Noble warrior, do not come.

This is the same girl who was promised
falsely to fifty men.
They got nothing but my spear
as I showed them to their graves.

Ferbaeth, they said, was brave enough
and had a houseful of fine heroes,
but a short moment quenched his fire,
I finished him with one throw.

Srúbdaire found a bitter end.
A hundred women held him dear.
There was a time his fame was high,
but neither wealth nor weapons saved him.

If they had offered her to me,
if I were the one that Medb smiled at,
I wouldn't think to do you harm
or touch the least part of your flesh.

‘That is the reason you shouldn't come to fight me, Ferdia,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘When we were with Scáthach and Uathach and Aife we always set out together to the battles and battlefields, to the strife and the struggle and the forests and deserts and dark mysteries.’

He spoke further:

‘Fast friends, forest-companions,
we made one bed and slept one sleep
in foreign lands after the fray
Scáthach’s pupils, two together,
we’d set forth to comb the forest.’

Ferdia said:

‘Cúchulainn, you bear your cunning lightly,
but I have mastered the same trade.
Our friendship is finished, through foul play.
Prepare to face your first defeat.
Forget that we were foster-brothers.
Squinter, you are past help!

‘We have talked too much,’ Ferdia said. ‘What weapons will we use today, Cúchulainn?’

‘You have the choice of weapons until nightfall,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘You reached the ford first.’

‘Do you remember,’ Ferdia said, ‘the very last feats we learned under Scáthach and Uathach and Aife?’

‘I remember them well,’ Cúchulainn said.

‘Let us set to, since you remember.’

They set to with those last feats. They took up their two finely-marked feat-playing shields and their eight shields with the sharp rims, their eight darts and their ivory-hilted straight swords and their eight small ivory darts that flew between them like bees on a pleasant day. They threw nothing that didn’t hit. And they were busy with these feats from the grey of early morning to the middle of the day, attacking each other and bringing each other’s many feats to nothing with the knobs and bosses of their feat-playing shields. But no matter how finely they threw they fended-off just as finely, so that neither drew blood from the other during all that time.

‘Let us break off now with these weapons, Cúchulainn,’ Ferdia said. ‘We’ll settle nothing this way.’

‘Very well, let us break off if it is time,’ Cúchulainn said.

They broke off. They threw their feat-playing gear into their charioteers’ arms.

‘What weapons will we use next, Cúchulainn?’ Ferdia said.

‘You still have the choice of weapons until nightfall,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘since you were first at the ford.’

‘Then,’ Ferdia said, ‘let us try our strong, smoothpolished slender spears, bound with the tight flax.’

‘Very well, let us try them,’ Cúchulainn said.

They took up their two tough shields, well matched for strength, and their strong, smooth-polished slender spears tightly bound with flax. They hurled their spears at each other from the

middle of the day until the evening sunset. And finely though they fended-off, they cast more finely still, and wounded and gored and bloodied each other for that length of time.

‘Cúchulainn, let us break off now from this,’ Ferdia said.

‘Very well,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘let us break off if it is time.’

They broke off and flung their weapons into their charioteers’ arms. They came up to each other and each put his arm round the other’s neck and gave him three kisses. Their horses passed that night in the same paddock and their charioteers by the same fire. Their charioteers made up fresh beds of rushes for them, with rests for their heads, as is right for wounded men. Men of healing and medicine came to heal them and make them whole and dropped wholesome, healing plants and herbs into their stabs and cuts and gashes and countless wounds. As many wholesome, healing plants and herbs as were put on Cúchulainn’s stabs and cuts and gashes and countless wounds, he sent the same over to Ferdia on the westward side of the ford, so that the men of Ireland couldn’t say, if he killed Ferdia, that he had won because he got more care. Ferdia, out of all the food and the health-giving, stimulating, delicious drinks that the men of Ireland gave him, sent an equal share over [to Cúchulainn on the northward side of the ford](#), for there were more supplying Ferdia with food than Cúchulainn. All the men of Ireland were supplying Ferdia, because he was protecting them from Cúchulainn, while only the people of Breg Plain were supplying Cúchulainn. Each day, when night fell, they used to come and talk to him.

They stayed so that night and got up early next day and came out to the ford of battle.

‘What weapons will we use today, Ferdia?’ Cúchulainn said.

‘You have the choice of weapons until nightfall,’ Ferdia said. ‘I had my choice yesterday.’

‘Then,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘let us try our big burdensome stabbing-spears. We may bring the end nearer today with our stabbing than with yesterday’s spear-throwing. Let our horses be brought and the chariots yoked. Today we’ll fight with horse and chariot.’

‘Let us begin,’ Ferdia said.

So that day they took up their two solid broadshields and their big burdensome stabbing-spears and began piercing and drilling each other and felling and overwhelming from the grey of early morning until the evening sunset. If ever birds in flight could pass through men’s bodies they could have passed through those bodies that day and brought bits of blood and meat with them out into the thickening air through the wounds and gashes. When the sun set that evening the horses were spent and the charioteers dazed and the high heroes themselves were at an end.

‘Let us break off now from this, Ferdia,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘for our horses are spent and our charioteers are dazed, and if they are finished why shouldn’t we be finished too?’

He said further:

‘Why suffer the chariots’ plunging
or struggle like Fomorian giants?
Hobble the horses.
Let the turmoil die away.’

‘Very well, let us break off if it is time,’ Ferdia said.

They broke off and threw their weapons into their charioteers’ arms. They came up to each other and each put his arm round the other’s neck and gave him three kisses. Their horses passed that night in the same paddock and their charioteers by the same fire, and their charioteers made fresh beds of rushes for them, with rests for their heads, as is right for wounded men. Men of healing and medicine came to watch over and guard them and mind them that night. So hideous were their stabs and cuts and gashes and countless wounds that nothing could be done but lay magic amulets on them and say spells and incantations to stop the spurts and spouts of blood. For every amulet or spell or charm that was laid on Cúchulainn’s cuts and gashes he had the same sent to Ferdia across on the westward side of the ford, and Ferdia, out of all the food and health-giving, stimulating, delicious drinks that the men of Ireland gave him, sent an equal share over to Cúchulainn on the northward side of the ford.

They stayed so that night and got up early next day, and came out to the ford of battle. That day Cúchulainn saw an aspect of evil and a dire darkness over Ferdia.

‘You have a dreadful look today, Ferdia,’ he said. ‘A shadow has fallen on your hair overnight and your eye has grown dull. All your fine shape and strength and structure are gone.’

‘It is not for any terror or dread of you,’ Ferdia said. ‘There isn’t a warrior in Ireland that I can’t beat off.’

Cúchulainn lamented and sorrowed. He made this chant, with Ferdia answering:

‘Ferdia, is it you I see?
Now I know it was your doom
when a woman sent you here
to fight against your foster-brother.’

Ferdia: ‘Cúchulainn, you are wise enough,
a true hero, a true warrior.
You know that everyone must come
to the sod that is his last bed.’

Cúchulainn: ‘Medb’s daughter Finnabair
—whatever beauty she may have —
was never promised you for love,
but so that you would use your strength.’

Ferdia: ‘My strength has been well used by now,
Hound of the sweet discipline.
Never to this very day
did I find braver, or hear of one.’

Cúchulainn: ‘Yours is the blame for what must come,
son of Dáman mac Dáiri
— coming, at a woman’s word,
to cross swords with your foster-brother.’

Ferdia: ‘Sweet Hound, if we part now
— though foster-brothers—without a fight,
think of my ill-fame and shame
at Cruachan before Ailill and Medb.’

Cúchulainn: ‘There is no man that ever ate,
no man that was ever born,
no joyous son of king or queen,
for whose sake I would do you harm.’

Ferdia: ‘Cúchulainn, tide of bravery,
I know that Medb has ruined us.
You will win victory and renown
and no one think you were at fault.’

Cúchulainn: ‘My high heart is a knot of blood,
my soul is tearing from my body,
I’d rather face a thousand fights,
Ferdia, than this fight with you.’

‘You may blame me all you like today,’ Ferdia said. ‘What weapons will we use?’

‘You have the choice of weapons today until nightfall,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘I chose yesterday.’

‘Then,’ Ferdia said, ‘let us take up our massive stroked dealing swords. We may bring the end nearer today with our hacking than with yesterday’s stabbing.’

‘Let us begin, then,’ Cúchulainn said.

So that day they took up their two great full-length shields and their massive stroke-dealing swords and began hacking and hewing and striking and destroying, and cutting bits and pieces the size of baby’s heads from each other’s shoulders and backs and flanks.

They hacked at each other in this way from the grey of early morning until the evening sunset.

‘Cúchulainn, let us break off from this,’ Ferdia said.

‘Very well,’ Cúchulainn said.

They broke off and flung their weapons into their charioteers’ arms.

They had met that day, two solid and satisfied men, lively and serene. But they parted that

night woeful and weary, two wasted men. And it wasn't in the same paddock that their horses passed that night, nor at the same fire their charioteers.

They stayed so that night. Ferdia got up early next day and came out alone to the ford of battle, for he knew that this day would decide the fierce struggle, and that one of them, or both, would fall. He put on his war-like battle-harness before Cúchulainn came out to meet him. This was his battle-harness: a filmy girdle of silk with a speckled-gold hem next his bright skin, a dark supple apron of leather over that on the outside, and a stout strong stone outside that again, the size of a millstone. That day, for fear and dread of the *gae bolga*, he put a deep and sturdy apron of twice-smelted iron over the stout strong stone like a millstone. He set on his head his war-like crested battle-helmet, finely decorated with forty precious carbuncles and inlaid with red enamel and crystal and carbuncle and gleaming stones from the East. He took in his right hand his furious spear, stout and fierce. In his left he took his battle-sword with its gold grip and its hilt of red-gold. On the curve of his back he took his handsome huge shield with the great red-gold knob in the middle and another fifty knobs around it, each big enough to hide a prize boar. That day Ferdia did a thousand thrilling feats on high, multiple and miraculous, that no-one had ever taught him — not his foster-mother or foster-father, nor Scáthach nor Uathach nor Aife — but drawn from him that day at the thought of Cúchulainn.

Cúchulainn came to the ford then and saw Ferdia's thousand thrilling feats on high, multiple and miraculous.

'Look, friend Laeg, at the thousand feats Ferdia does on high, multiple, miraculous — thrilling! He is going to use them all on me today. If my defeat seems near at any time, you must abuse and insult and mock me to make my anger rise. But if ever his defeat seems near tell me that, and praise and encourage me to raise my spirits.'

'I will, Cúchulainn,' Laeg said.

Then Cúchulainn too put on his war-like battle-harness and did a thousand thrilling, multiple and miraculous feats on high that he also had learned from no-one — not Scáthach nor Uathach nor Aife. Ferdia saw those feats and knew they were all for him.

'What weapons shall we use, Ferdia?' Cúchulainn said.

'You have the choice of weapons until nightfall,' Ferdia said.

'Very well, let us try fighting in ford water,' Cúchulainn said.

'Let us try that,' Ferdia said.

Ferdia, though he spoke lightly, knew that it was the worst thing for him, because Cúchulainn destroyed every hero and high warrior that ever fought him in ford water. Still, marvellous deeds were done by the two heroes that day in the ford — those two first and foremost, those two chief chariot-warriors of the west, those two blazing torches of bravery in Ireland, those two lavish and liberal gift-scatterers of the whole northwest of the world, those two keys to Ireland's valour, flung together from afar by the ill-doing and meddling of Ailill and Medb. They began working their feats on each other there from the grey of the dewy dawn until high noon. At noon the men's madness mounted and they drew closer to each other.

Cúchulainn sprang straight from the brink of the ford on to the shield-knob of Ferdia mac Damáin to strike down over the edge of the shield at his head. Ferdia struck the shield a blow

of his left elbow that sent Cúchulainn away back from him like a bird past the brink of the ford. Cúchulainn sprang again from the brink onto the knob of Ferdia's shield, to strike down at his head over the edge of the shield. But Ferdia struck the shield a blow of his left knee that sent Cúchulainn away back from him like a little boy past the brink of the ford.

Laeg saw this.

'Well, now!' he said. 'Your enemy shook you then as easily as a loving mother slaps her son! He tossed you aside *as if he was rinsing a cup in a tub*! He crushed you like a mill crushing fine malt! He went through you like a drill through an oak! He bound you in knots like a creeper entangling a tree! He pounced on you like a hawk on a little bird! From this day onward, my devilish little half-sprite,' Laeg said, 'you have no right or claim or title to great deeds or daring.'

At that Cúchulainn rose up for the third time, quick as the wind, swift as a swallow, in a storm of strength and dragonish fury, and landed on the knob of Ferdia's shield and tried to strike down at him over the shield-rim. But that battle-warrior gave a shake of his shield that sent Cúchulainn off, as though he had never landed on it, into the middle of the ford. Cúchulainn warped in his fury-spasm; he blew up and swelled like a bladder full of breath and bent himself in a fearful hideous arch, mottled and terrifying, and the huge high hero loomed straight up over Ferdia, vast as a Fomorian giant or a man from the sea-kingdom.

Then they fought together so closely that their heads touched at the top and their feet at the bottom and their hands in the middle around the edges and knobs of their shields. So closely they fought that their shields split and burst from rim to belly: so closely they fought that their spears bent and collapsed, worn-out from the tips to the rivets: so closely they fought that their shield-rims and sword-hilts and spear-shafts screamed like demons and devils and goblins of the glen and fiends of the air: so closely they fought that they drove the river off its course and out of its bed, leaving a dry space in the middle of the ford big enough for the last royal burial-ground of a king or queen — not a drop of water on it except what the two heroes and high warriors splashed there in their trampling and slithering in the ford: so closely they fought that the horses of the men of Ireland broke loose in panic and terror, rearing and raving, and broke their shackle-hoops and hobbles and reins and ropes, so that the women and children, the infants, the ill and the imbeciles broke out southwestward from the camp of the men of Ireland.

Then, while they were busy with the sharp swordedges, Ferdia got a single fatal chance at Cúchulainn, and dealt him a stroke of his ivory-hilted straight-sword and buried it in his breast. The blood gushed over his belt and the ford grew crimson with the battle-warrior's bodygore. Cúchulainn could bear it no longer — all Ferdia's ruinous strokes of strength, his strokes downward and across. And *he called out to Laeg mac Riabraid for the *gae bolga**. Ferdia heard Cúchulainn calling for the *gae bolga*, and he dropped his shield to cover his lower body. Then Cúchulainn took his short javelin and hurled it from the middle of his palm over the rim of Ferdia's shield and the edge of his horn-skin, driving it through him so that it pierced the heart in his breast and showed half its length out through his back. Ferdia raised up the shield to cover his upper body, but it was too late. The charioteer sent the *gae bolga* down the stream.

'*Beware the *gae bolga*,*' he said.

Cúchulainn caught it in the fork of his foot and sent it casting toward Ferdia and it went

through the deep and sturdy apron of twice-smelted iron, and shattered in three parts the stout strong stone the size of a mill-stone, and went coursing through [the highways and byways of his body](#) so that every single joint filled with barbs.

That is enough now,' Ferdia said, 'I'll die of that. There is strength in the thrust of your right foot. It is wrong I should fall at your hand.'

He said:

'Hound of the bright deeds,
you have killed me unfairly.
Your guilt clings to me
as my blood sticks to you.

By the way of deceit
no good can come.
I am struck dumb.
[I am leaving this life.](#)

My ribs are crushed in,
my heart is all blood.
I have not fought well.
Hound, I am fallen.'

Cúchulainn ran toward him and clasped his two arms round him and carried him with him — weapons, armour and harness — north across the ford with him so that the spoils would be to the north of the ford and not westward of it where the men of Ireland were. Cúchulainn set Ferdia down on the ground and there, by Ferdia's head, fainted away in a cloudy trance. Laeg saw this, and how all the men of Ireland rose to attack him.

'Get up, now, Cúcuc!' Laeg said. 'The men of Ireland are coming to attack us, and they are not thinking of single combat now that you have killed Ferdia mac Damáin meic Dáiri.'

'My friend, why should I rise,' he said, 'and this one fallen by my hand?'

The charioteer spoke to him, with Cúchulainn answering:

'Rise up, slaughter-hound of Emain!
You must recover, have more spirit.
You have felled Ferdia of the hosts
— a dire combat, god of doom!'

Cúchulainn: 'What have I to do with spirit?
Stupor and sorrow weigh me down
after the deed that I have done,
this corpse that I have hacked so harshly.'

Laeg: 'You have nothing to regret;

indeed you ought to boast of it.
He has stained his spear in you
and left you streaming, and near death.'

Cúchulainn: 'What matter? He could have taken off
my leg, or my very arm.
Alas, Ferdia of the steeds
will never draw another breath.'

Laeg: 'The women of the Craebruad
wouldn't have it otherwise.
Ferdia dead and you alive
— that separation they can bear.'

Cúchulainn: 'From the first day I left Cuailnge
to come against the mighty Medb
she has had carnage and renown,
with all the warriors I've slain.'

Laeg: 'You have had no sound sleep
since you stopped the great Táin.
Because there were so few to help
you woke early many a morning.'

Cúchulainn began mourning and lamenting Ferdia there, and said:

'Alas Ferdia! Woe for you, before we fought together, that you didn't listen to somebody who knew my high, brave deeds. Woe for you, that Laeg mac Riagabra didn't chide you with memories of our fostering together. Woe for you that you rejected Fergus's well-meant warning; woe for you that proud, kind Conall, much honoured in arms, didn't help with word of our fostering together. Those are men who wouldn't run to you with news of the wants and wishes or the false promises of any fairheaded Connacht woman. Those are men who knew that none of human birth, until the day of doom, can ever match the heavy, high deeds that I do against Connacht with shield or shield-rim, sword or dart, draughts or chess, horse or chariot. Never will hand of warrior hack the flesh of a hero like the honoured heir Ferdia. Never will the red-mouthed Badb screech like this at the shieldbright sheltering hosts in the gap of battle. Never till the day of doom will any one fighting for Cruachan get the bargain you got, crimson-visaged son of Damán,' Cúchulainn said.

Cúchulainn got up from beside Ferdia's head.

'Well, Ferdia,' Cúchulainn said, 'it was a great doom and desolation that the men of Ireland wished on you when they sent you to do battle and combat with me. It is no light thing to struggle and strive with Cúchulainn on the Táin Bó Cuailnge.'

He said:

‘Ferdia, dead by their deceit,
our last meeting I lament.
You are dead and I must live
to mourn my everlasting loss.

When we were away with Scáthach
learning victory overseas,
it seemed our friendship would remain
unbroken till the day of doom.

I loved the noble way you blushed,
and loved your fine, perfect form.
I loved your blue clear eye,
your way of speech, your skillfulness.

Your like, crimson son of Dáman,
never moved to the tearing fray,
never was seized with manly wrath
nor bore shield on his broad back.

Never till this very day,
Ferdia, did I ever find
your match for great deeds in battle
since I slew Aife’s only son.

Medb’s daughter Finnabair,
whatever beauty she may have,
she was an empty offering,
a string to hold the sand, Ferdia.’

Cúchulainn stayed staring there at Ferdia.

‘Well, friend Laeg,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘strip Ferdia now. Take off his gear and garments. Let me see the brooch he fought this furious battle for.’

Laeg came and stripped Ferdia and took off his gear and garments, and showed him the brooch. Cúchulainn mourned and lamented:

‘[Ferdia of the hosts](#) and the hard blows,
beloved golden brooch,
I mourn your conquering arm
and our fostering together.

You were [a sight](#)

to please a prince;
your gold-rimmed shield,
your slender sword,

the ring of bright silver
on your fine hand,
your skill at chess,
your flushed, sweet cheek,

your curled yellow hair
like a lovely jewel,
the leaf-shaped belt
you wore at your waist.

You fell to the Hound,
and I mourn, little calf.
The shield didn't save you
that you brought to the fray.

Shameful our struggle,
the grief and uproar!
O fair, fine hero
who shattered armies
and crushed them under foot,
golden brooch, I mourn.'

'Now, friend Laeg,' Cúchulainn said, 'cut Ferdia open and take the *gae bolga* out of him. I need my weapon.'

Laeg came up and cut Ferdia open and took out the *gae bolga*. Cúchulainn saw his weapon crimson and bloody from Ferdia's body and he said:

'Ill-met, Ferdia, like this
— you crimson and pale in my sight,
stretched in a bed of blood,
and I with my weapon unwiped.

When we were beyond the sea,
Scáthach's and Uathach's pupils,
who thought of such pale lips
or a weapon-struggle between us?

I remember when Scáthach lifted
her sharp harsh cry:
"Germán Garbglas is coming!

Forward to the furious fray!”

Then I said to Ferdia
and to Lugaid of the lavish hand
and to fond, foolish Ferbaeth:
“Let us go to meet Germán.”

At the battle-rock on the slope
above the Lake of Envy
we took four hundred men
from the Islands of Victory.

I stood with fierce Ferdia
in the door of Germán’s fort.
I killed Rinn mac Niuil,
he killed Ruad mac Forniuil.

Ferbaeth killed Bláth mac Colbaí
of the red sword, on the slope.
Grim, swift Lugaid slew
Mugairne from the Tyrrhene Sea.

We went in and I slew there
four times fifty raging men.
Ferdia killed Dam Dreimend
and Dam Dilenn — a cruel crew.

We levelled Germán’s cunning fort
above the wide, glittering sea
and took Germán himself alive
to Scáthach of the great shield.

Our famous foster-mother bound us
in a blood pact of friendship,
so that rage would never rise
between friends in fair Elga.

Sad and pitiful the day
that saw Ferdia’s strength spent
and brought the downfall of a friend.
I poured him a drink of red blood!

If you had met your death then
fighting with Greek warriors,

I wouldn't have outlasted you,
I would have died at your side.

Misery has befallen us,
two foster-sons of Scáthach
— I, broken and blood red,
your chariot standing empty.

Misery has befallen us,
two foster-sons of Scáthach
— I, broken and blood-raw,
and you lying stark dead.

Misery has befallen us,
two foster-sons of Scáthach
— you dead and I alive.
Bravery is battle-madness!

‘Well, Cúcuc,’ Laeg said, ‘let us leave the ford now. We have been here too long.’

‘Very well, let us leave it, friend Laeg,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘All the struggles and contests that I ever fought seem only playful games now after my struggle with Ferdia.’

And he said these words:

‘It was all play, all sport,
until Ferdia came to the ford.
A like learning we both had,
[the same rights, the same belongings](#),
the same good foster-mother
— her whose name is most honoured.

All play, all sport,
until Ferdia came to the ford.
We had the same force and fury,
and the same feats of war.
Scáthach awarded two shields,
one to me, one to Ferdia.

All play, all sport,
until Ferdia came to the ford.
[Misery! A pillar of gold](#)
I have levelled in the ford,
the bull of the tribe-herd,
braver than any man.

All play, all sport,
until Ferdia came to the ford
— fiery and ferocious lion,
fatal, furious flood-wave!

All play, all sport,
until Ferdia came to the ford.
I thought beloved Ferdia
would live forever after me
— yesterday, a mountain-slope;
today, only a shade.

I have slaughtered, on this Táin,
three countless multitudes:
choice cattle, choice men,
choice horses, fallen everywhere!

The army, a huge multitude,
that came from cruel Cruachan
has lost between a half and a third,
slaughtered in my savage sport.

Never came to the battle-field,
nor did Banba's belly bear,
nor over sea or land came
a king's son of fairer fame.'



XII ULSTER RISES FROM ITS PANGS



THE ARMIES went off southward from Ferdia's Ford. Cúchulainn lay there sick. Senoll Uathach, the Hideous, and the two sons of Ficce were the first to reach him. They bore him back with them to Conaille, where they nursed his wounds and bathed them in the waters of [the river Sas, for ease](#), the river Búan for steadfastness, Bithslán for lasting health, the clear Finnglas, the bright Gleóir, the dashing Bedc; in Tadc, Talamed, Rinn and Bir, in the sour Brenide and narrow Cumang; in Celenn and Gaenemain, Dichu, Muach and Miliuc, Den, Deilt and Dubglas.

While Cúchulainn was washing in those waters, the armies continued and pitched camp at Imorach Smiromrach, the Mash of Marrow. [Mac Roth](#) left the armies and went northward to keep watch on the men of Ulster. He went as far as Sliab Fuait to see if any were following. He brought back news [that he saw only one chariot](#).

'I saw a chariot crossing the plain from the north,' Mac Roth said. 'The man had silvery-grey hair and carried no weapon but a silver spike in one hand. His chariot was coloured bright as the May. He was goading the charioteer as well as the horses, as though he felt he would never catch up with the armies. A brindled hunting dog ran in front of him.'

'Who would that be, Fergus?' Ailill said. 'Do you think it was Conchobor or Celtchar?'

'No' Fergus said. 'I believe it is Cethern, Fintan's son, a man of generosity and a bloody blade.'

Fergus was right. Cethern hurled himself directly at the camp and slaughtered many men. But he himself was wounded badly. He came back from the battle toward Cúchulainn with his guts around his feet, and Cúchulainn pitied his wounds.

'Get me a healer,' Cethern said to Cúchulainn.

A bed of fresh rushes was fixed for him, with a pillow, and Cúchulainn sent Laeg to the enemy camp, to ask Fiacha mac Fir Febe for a healer, and to say he would kill them all if they didn't come to look at Cethern — no matter where they hid themselves, even under the earth. The healers grew worried at this, for there was no one in the camp that he hadn't hit; but they

went out to see him. The first healer came up and examined him.

‘You won’t survive this,’ he said.

‘Then neither will you!’ Cethern cried, and struck him with his fist, and his brains splashed over his ears. He killed fifty healers, some say, in the same way, though others say he killed only fifteen. The last of them got a glancing blow and fell stunned. Cúchulainn saved his life.

Cúchulainn said to Cethern:

‘You had no right to kill those healers. We’ll get no one to come to you now.’

‘They had no right to give me bad news.’

They sent for the holy healer Fingin, Conchobor’s own healer, to examine Cúchulainn and Cethern. Fingin was well aware of the great sufferings of Cúchulainn and Cethern, and soon they saw his chariot coming. Cúchulainn went up to him and said:

‘Watch out for Cethern.’ (Indeed it would have been foolish not to, when he had already killed fifteen other healers).

Fingin went up and studied him from a distance.

‘Examine me,’ Cethern said. ‘This great wound here looks grave. What made it?’

‘A vain, arrogant woman gave you that wound,’ Fingin said.

‘I believe you are right,’ Cethern said. ‘A tall, fair, longfaced woman with soft features came at me. She had a head of yellow hair, and two gold birds on her shoulders. She wore a purple cloak folded about her, with five hands’ breadth of gold on her back. She carried a light, stinging, sharp-edged lance in her hand, and she held an iron sword with a woman’s grip over her head — a massive figure. It was she who came against me first.’

‘Then I’m sorry for you,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘That was Medb of Cruachan.’

‘This next,’ the healer said, ‘was a light, half-hearted wound from some kinsman. It won’t kill you.’

‘That is true,’ Cethern said. ‘A warrior with a curved scallop-edged shield came at me. He had a curve-bladed spear in his hand and an ivory-hilted, iron-bladed sword in three sections. He wore a brown cloak wrapped around him, held with a silver brooch. He took a slight wound from me in return.’

‘I know him,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘That was Illann, Fergus mac Roich’s son.’

‘This wound,’ the healer said, ‘was the work of two warriors.’

‘Yes,’ Cethern said. ‘A pair of them came at me together, with two long shields. They had two tough silver chains and a silver belt each, and two five-pronged spears, banded plain and silver. Each had a collar of silver.’

‘I know them,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘Those were Oil and Oichne, two of Ailill’s and Medb’s foster-sons. They never go to battle unless they are certain someone will fall at their hands.’

‘Then two more warriors set upon me,’ Cethern said, ‘bright and noble and manly in looks.’

‘I know them,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘Those were Bun and Mecon, Trunk and Root, from the king’s most trusted people.’

‘The blood is black here,’ the healer said. ‘They speared through your heart at an angle and

made a cross inside you. I can't promise to cure this,' he said, 'but there are a couple of ways I might keep it from carrying you off.'

'And this,' the healer said, 'was the bloody onslaught of [two forest kings](#).'

'Yes,' Cethern said. 'A pair of light-haired warriors set upon me, [their faces the size of wooden bowls, one bigger than the other](#). Yes indeed,' he said, 'each of them pierced the other's point inside me.'

'I know them,' Cúchulainn said. 'Those were two warriors from Medb's great household, Braen and Láréne, "two sons of three lights," the two sons of the forest king.'

'And this,' the healer Fingin said, 'was an attack by three nephews.'

'Yes,' Cethern said. 'Three men, all alike, set upon me.'

They had a bronze chain between them, deadly with spikes and spears.'

'Those were the three scabbards of Banba, from Cúroi mac Dáiri's people.'

'This one,' Fingin said, 'was dug by three soldiers.'

'Yes,' Cethern said. 'Three warriors set upon me with war-clubs, wearing three collars of silver round their necks. Each had a handfull of lances and stuck a spear in me, but I stuck him back with it.'

'Those were warriors from [Iruath](#),' Cúchulainn said.

'They pierced you expertly inside the wound,' the healer said. 'They have cut the bloody sinews of your heart. It is rolling around inside you like a ball of wool in an empty bag.'

'Here,' Fingin said, 'I see the work of three furious men.'

'Yes,' Cethern said. 'Three great fat grey-bellied men came at me, discussing my good points as they came.'

'Those were three of Medb's and Ailill's stewards,' Cúchulainn said, 'Scenb and Rann and Fodail — carver, divider and server.'

'These three blows were struck in the morning,' Fingin said.

'Yes,' Cethern said. 'Three warriors attacked me, wrapped in black fur cloaks worn bald. Their hooded tunics were covered in stains and they carried three iron cudgels in their hands.'

'Those were the three madmen of Baiscne, three murderous servants of Medb,' Cúchulainn said.

'Two brothers attacked here,' Fingin said.

'Yes,' Cethern said. 'Two great warriors in dark green cloaks set upon me, with curved scallop-edged shields. Each of them had a broad, grey, slender-shafted stabbingspear in his hand.'

'I know them,' Cúchulainn said, 'Cormac "the king's pillar" and [Cormac, Mael Foga's son](#).'

'Their wounds came close together,' the healer said. 'They got into your gullet and worked there with their deadly javelins.'

'Two brothers struck you in this place,' he said.

'You may be right,' Cethern said. 'A pair of warriors set upon me, one with a head of yellow curls, the other with a head of dark curls. They carried two bright shields graven with

gold animals, and two bright-hilted iron swords. Red-embroidered hooded tunics were wrapped about them.'

'I know them,' Cúchulainn said. 'Those were Maine Athramail, the fatherlike, and Maine Máthramail, the motherlike.'

'This is the double wound of a son and a father,' the healer said.

'Yes,' Cethern said. 'Two huge men came at me, their eyes bright as torches, with gold crowns on their heads. They had gold-hilted swords at their waists. Scabbards with tassels of speckled gold hung down to their feet.'

'I know them,' Cúchulainn said. 'Those were Ailill and his son, Maine Cotagaib Uli, who has the likeness of all.'

'Tell me, friend Fingin, what you think of my state.'

'I'll tell you no lie,' Fingin said. 'Don't look to your cows now for calves. If it were only a question of twos or threes ... But your case is clear — a whole horde has left its tracks in you, and one way or another your life is done.'

Fingin turned his chariot away.

'Your advice is only the same as the others,' Cethern said, and he struck him with his fist and sent him across the chariot's two shafts and smashed the chariot itself.

'That was a wicked blow to give an old man!' Cúchulainn said. (It is from his word 'Luae' — the blow, or kick — that the name Ochtur Lui, in Crích Rois, is taken.) 'Save your kicks for your enemies.'

After this the healer gave him a choice: either to treat his sickness for a whole year and live out his life's span, or get enough strength quickly, in three days and three nights, to fit him to fight his present enemies. He chose the second course. The healer asked Cúchulainn for bonemarrow to heal him, and Cúchulainn went out and took what beasts he could find and made a mash of marrow out of their bones. From this comes the name Smirommair, the Bath of Marrow, in Crích Rois.

Cethern slept day and night in the marrow, absorbing it. He said afterward:

'I have no ribs left. Get me the ribs out of the chariotframe.'

'I'll get them for you,' Cúchulainn said.

Then Cethern said:

'If only I had my own weapons, I'd do things they would talk about for ever.'

'I see something like them coming,' Cúchulainn said.

'What is it?' Cethern said.

'I think I see Finn Bee coming toward us in a chariot — Eochaid's daughter, your wife.'

The woman came in sight with Cethern's weapons in the chariot. Cethern took his weapons and made off toward the armies, with the frame of his chariot bound around his belly to give him strength. The healer Itholl, who had lain like a dead man among the bodies of the other healers, went ahead to warn the Connacht camp. In their dread, they put Ailill's crown on top of a pillar-stone, and Cethern attacked the pillar-stone and drove his sword through it, and his fist after the sword. This is the origin of the name Lia Toll, the Pierced Stone, in Crích Rois.

‘You have played me false,’ Cethern cried. ‘I’ll give you no rest, now,’ he said, ‘until one of you puts on this crown of Ailill’s.’

He ground them down day and night until one of the Maine placed the crown on his head and came against him in his chariot. Cethern threw his shield at him and it split him and his charioteer open, and cleaved through his horses into the ground. Then the armies closed in on him and he wrought havoc among them until he fell.

Fintan came to avenge his son Cethern, with three times fifty belted and bristling men, all with double-headed spears. They fought seven battles against the enemy, and only Fintan himself and [his son Crimthann](#) came out alive, and not one of their followers. Crimthann got separated from his father by a wall of shields and was saved by Ailill out of fear of Fintan, on condition he would fight them no more until he came with Conchobor to the last Battle. Fintan promised friendship to Ailill for giving him back his son.

[When Fintan’s people and the men of Ireland were found](#), they had each other caught by the lips and noses in their fanged teeth.

Menn mac Sálchada went against them with thirty bristling men. Twelve of Medb’s men fell there and twelve of his own as well. Menn himself was badly wounded and all his followers reddened with blood.

The men of Ireland said:

‘It is a red shame for Menn mac Sálchada — his people slaughtered and ruined, and he himself wounded and red with blood.’

Menn was let leave the encampment and no more men were killed. They told him they wouldn’t think it any dishonour for him to go back to his home in the watered lands by the Boann river. He went and stayed there. He thought it no dishonour to leave the camp until such time as he was to come with Conchobor to the last Battle.

[Cúchulainn told his charioteer to go for help to Rochad](#) mac Faithemain. The charioteer found him and told him to come and help Cúchulainn if his pangs were finished; he said they could steal up on some of the host and destroy them. Rochad came southward with a hundred warriors.

‘Scan the plain for us,’ Ailill said.

‘I see a troop crossing the plain,’ the watcher said. ‘They have a tender youth among them and they reach up only to his shoulders.’

‘Who is that, Fergus?’ Ailill said.

‘That is Rochad mac Faithemain,’ he said, ‘coming to help Cúchulainn.’

‘Here is what to do,’ Ailill said: ‘send out a hundred warriors into the middle of the plain with the girl Finnabair in front of them. Send a horseman to tell him that the girl wants to speak alone with him. Then you can get your hands on him and end any danger from his army.’

This was agreed. It happened that Finnabair loved Rochad, for he was the handsomest hero in Ulster at that time, and she had gone to her mother Medb to speak about it.

‘I have loved this warrior a long time.’ she said. ‘He is my true and first and chosen love.’

‘If you have so much love for him,’ Ailill and Medb said, ‘sleep with him tonight and ask him for a truce for our armies until he comes against us with Conchobor on the day of the great Battle.’

Rochad came to meet the horseman, who said:

‘I have come to you from Finnabair. Will you talk to her?’

Rochad went alone to talk to her. The troop rushed at him from all sides and grasped him in their arms. So he was captured and his followers fled. Later he was set free on his promise not to fight the armies until the coming of the whole of Ulster. He was offered Finnabair for this and he took her. The girl slept with him that night. Then he returned to Ulster.

The seven kings of Munster were told that Rochad had slept with the girl. One of them said:

‘That girl was promised to me, with fifteen hostages as a guarantee, to get me to join this army.’

All seven confessed in turn that she had been promised to them. They came to take vengeance against Ailill’s sons who were keeping watch over the armies in Glenn Domain. But Medb rose up against them, and the Galeóin troop of three thousand rose up also, and Ailill and Fergus. Seven hundred died [slaughtering each other there in Glenn Domain](#).

When Finnabair heard that seven hundred men had died because of her deceit, she fell dead of shame. From this comes the place-name Finnabair Slébe, Finnabair in the Mountains.

Then Ilech came against them at Ath Feidli. He was Laegaire Buadach’s grand-father; Laegaire was the son of Connad the Yellow-haired, Ilech’s son. Ilech had been left under Laegaire’s care at Ráith Impail. He came to take vengeance on the army in a decrepit old chariot without covers or cushions. Two old yellow horses pulled the ancient chariot. The whole frame was filled with [stones and clods](#) that he flung at everyone who came up to look at him in his nakedness, with his narrow tool and his balls hanging down through the chariot floor. The army kept jeering at the spectacle of the naked man, but Dóchae mac Mágach stopped the rabble at their mocking, and called out to Ilech that he would take his sword and his head from him at the end of that day, if he didn’t get out of the army’s way.

Ilech saw the mash of marrow. They told him it was made out of Ulster cows’ bones. That day he made another marrow-mash beside it, a trench of marrow out of Connachtmen’s bones. At nightfall Dóchae cut off Ilech’s head and brought it to his grandson Laegaire. He made a pact of friendship with Laegaire and kept the sword.

The armies moved next toward Tailtiu, where three times fifty of Ulster’s charioteers attacked them. They killed three times their own number, but they themselves were all killed. Roi Arad, the Battlefield of the Charioteer, is the name of the place: a charioteer and his company fell there on the Táin Bó Cuailnge.

The armies beheld one evening a great stone hurtling upon them from the east, and another like it from the west. The two stones met in the air [and fell over the camps of Fergus and Ailill](#). This playful sport continued until the same hour next day, while the armies sat still with their shields held over their heads to guard against the blocks of stone, and the plain grew full of stones. This is the origin of [Mag Clochair](#), the Stony Plain. Cúroi mac Dáiri was the cause of this. He had come to help his own people, and stopped at Cotail. Munremur mac Gerrcinn was stopped opposite him at Ard Roich: he had come from Emain Macha to help Cúchulainn. Cúroi knew there was nobody in the armies who could withstand Munremur. It was these two between them that made the sport.



The armies asked them to be still. [Munremur and Cúroi](#) made a pact: Cúroi went back to his home and Munremur went to Emain Macha. Munremur didn't come again [until the day of the Battle](#).

While these things were happening, the pangs of the Ulstermen were coming to an end. From Ráith Sualdaim, his house on Murtheimne plain, Sualdam heard how [his son Cúchulainn](#) was being harassed.

‘Are the heavens rent?’ he said. ‘Is the sea bursting its bounds? Is the end of the world upon us? Or is that my son crying out as he fights against great odds?’

He went out to his son but Cúchulainn didn’t want him there, for if anyone killed him he would have no strength to avenge him.

‘Go to the men of Ulster,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘Tell them to come and fight these armies now. If they don’t come soon, they’ll never get their revenge.’

His father could see that there was no part of his body bigger than the tip of a rush that hadn’t been pierced. In his left hand alone, though his shield here protected it, there were fifty bloody places.

Sualdam went to Emain, and cried out to the men of Ulster:

‘Men murdered, women stolen, cattle plundered!’

He gave his first cry from the slope of the enclosure, his second beside the fort and the third cry from the Mound of the Hostages inside Emain itself. Nobody answered. (In Ulster [no man spoke before Conchobor](#), and Conchobor wouldn’t speak before the three druids.) Then a druid said:

‘Who is robbing and stealing and plundering?’

‘Ailill mac Mata,’ Sualdam said, ‘with the knowledge of Fergus mac Roich. Your people are harassed as far as Dún Sobairche and their cattle and their women and all their herds taken. Cúchulainn kept them out of Murtheimne Plain and Crích Rois; for three winter months now he has fastened his cloak round him with hoops of twigs and kept dry wisps in his joints. He has been wounded so sorely that his joints are coming asunder.’

‘This man is annoying the king,’ the druid said. ‘By rights he ought to suffer death.’

‘It would be fitting,’ Conchobor said.

‘It would,’ all the men of Ulster said.

‘Still, what Sualdam says is true,’ Conchobor said. ‘They have been overrunning us from the Monday at summer’s end to the Monday at spring’s beginning.’

It seemed to Sualdam that they were not doing enough, and he ran out while they were speaking. But he fell over his shield [and the scalloped rim cut his head off](#). His head was brought back on a shield into his house in Emain, where it uttered the same warning again.

‘Why all this uproar?’ Conchobor said. ‘Haven’t they still got the sea before them? the sky overhead? the earth under foot? I’ll beat them in battle, and bring back every cow to its byre, and every woman and child back home again.’

Conchobor laid his hand upon his son, Finnchad Fer Benn, the Horned Man — so called because of the silver horns he wore — and said:

‘Rise up now, Finnchad, and [summon Deda](#) to me, from his bay, and Leamain and Fallach and Fergus’s son Illann from Gabar; Dorlunsa from Imchlár, Derg Inderg the Red, Fedilmid Cilair Chetaig, Faeladán and Rochad mac Faithemain from Rígdonn; Lugaid and Lugda;

Cathbad from his bay; the three named Coirpre from Aelai, Laeg from his causeway and Gemen from his valley; Senoll Uathach, the Hideous, from Diabal Arda, and Fintan's son Cethern from Carlaig; Cethern from Eillne, Aurothor, and Mulach from his fortress; Amargin the royal poet, and Uathach of the Badb; the great queen at Dún Sobairche; Ieth and Roth and Fiachna from his mound; Dam Dreimend, Andiaraid and Maine mac Briathrach; Dam Derg, Mod and Maithes; Irmaithis from Corp Gliath; Gabar from Laigi Líne, Eochaid from Saimne and Eochaid from Latharnu; Uma mac Remanfisig from Fedan; Munremur mac Gerrcinn, and Senlobair from Canann Gall; Follamain, and Lugaid, king of the Fir Bolg, at Laigi Líne; Buadgalach and Ambuach, and Fergna from Barréne; Aine and Errge Echbél the horse-lipped; Abra, and Celtchar mac Uthidir from Lethglas; Laegaire Milbél the honey-mouthed from his hearth; the three sons of Dromscailt mac Dregamm; Drenda and Drendas and Cimbe; Cimling and Cimmene from the slopes of Caba; Fachtna, Sencha's son, in his rath; Sencha and Senchairthe; Briccir and Bricirne; Breic and Buan and Bairech; Aengus and Fergus, Léte's sons, and Aengus of the Fir Bolg; Bruchur and Alamiach of the old tribes in Sláinge, and the three sons of Fiachna from Cuailnge; Conall Cernach from Midluachair, Connad mac Morna from Felunt, Cúchulainn mac Sualdaim from Murtheimne, Amargin from Es Ruaid and Laeg from Léire; Sálchada's son at Correnna and Cúroi mac Amargin in his rath; Aengus Fer Benn Uma of the copper horns, and Ogma Grianaineach, whose face is like the sun, from Brecc; Eo mac nOircne, and Tollchenn from Saithi, and Mogoll Echbél from the Plain of Ai; Connla Saeb from Uarba, Laegaire Buadach from Impail; Ailill son of Amargin from Tailtiu, and Furbaide Fer Benn, the horned one, from Seil on Inis Plain; Cúscraid Menn the stammerer, the sons of Lí, and Fingin from Finngabar; Cremath and the hostel keepers Blai Fichit and Blai Briuga at Fesair; Eogan mac Durthacht from Fernmag; Dord and Seirid and Serthe, Oblan from Cuilenn, Cuirther and Liana from Eith Benne, Fernel and Finnchad from Sliab Betha, Talgobain from Bernas, and Menn mac Sálchada from Dulo Plain; Iroll from Blarigi, Tibraide mac Ailcotha; Iala the ravager from Dobla Plain, Rus mac Ailcotha, Maine mac Cruim, Ninnéach mac Cruinn, Dipsemilid and Mál mac Rochrad; Muinne, Munremur's son, Fiatach Ferndoirre son of Dubthach, and Muirne Menn.'

Finnchad found that his task was easy, for all the chieftains in Conchobor's province had been waiting for Conchobor to move. They had gathered around Emain east and north and west and entered Emain Macha in time for Conchobor's waking.

They moved out of Emain southward to look for the armies. The first stage of their march was from Emain to Iraird Cuilenn.

'Why are you stopping here?' Conchobor said.

'We are waiting for your sons,' they said. 'They are gone with thirty others to Temair to get Ere son of Coirpre Niafer and Fedelm Noichride. We're not leaving here until their two troops of three thousand arrive.'

'I can't wait until the men of Ireland discover I have risen from my pangs,' Conchobor said.

Conchobor and Celtchar went ahead with three times fifty chariots and came back with eight score men's heads from Airthir Midi Ford, in East Meath. The ford is known ever since as Ath Féne, Warriors' Ford. **These eight score warriors** had been keeping watch for the armies. They had eight score women with them, their share of the plunder. When Conchobor and Celtchar

brought the heads back to the camp, Celtchar said to Conchobor:

‘Slingshots reddened
by a terrible king
proud past compare
sinews split
limp with horror
in a hundred branches
ground given up
of fourhorse chariots thirty
of the host’s hard steeds a hundred
two hundred druids to lead us
a solid man not lacking
at Conchobor’s back
prepare for the battle
let the warriors wake
the battle breaks out
at Gáirech and Irgairech.’

Others say it was Cúscraid the stammerer of Macha, Conchobor’s son, who chanted this the night before the battle, just after Laegaire Buadach had made the chant beginning: ‘Rise kings of Macha,’ and that he chanted it in the eastern camp.

During the night Dubthach Dael of Ulster, the blacktongued, dreamed of the armies at Gáirech and Irgairech, and spoke in his sleep:

‘Fearful morning
fearful season
hosts in turmoil
kings cast down
necks broken
a red sun
three hosts crushed
by the host of Ulster
about Conchobor
woman struggle
herds driven
the morning following
heroes felled

hounds cut down
horses mangled
tunics torn
the earth drinking
spilt blood
of gathered hordes.'

This upset them in their sleep. The Nemain brought confusion on the armies and a hundred of their number fell dead. Silence fell again, until Cormac Connlongas (or some say Ailill mac Mata) was heard chanting in the western camp:

'Ailill's hours!

A great truce
the truce at Cuillenn
a great plot
the plot at Delind
great herds of horses
the herds at Assal
a great plague
at Tuath Bressi.'

XIII THE COMPANIES ADVANCE



DURING this time, the Connacht army took counsel with Ailill and Medb and Fergus. They decided to send scouts to see if the men of Ulster had reached the plain. Ailill said:

'Mac Roth, go and see if they are all here on the plain of Meath. If they are not here yet, I have got clear away with their goods and herds. They can look for fight as much as they like now, I'm not waiting here for them any longer.'

Mac Roth went off and scanned and scoured the plain, and hurried back to Ailill and Medb and Fergus. When he first looked out [from the Sliab Fuait road](#) he had seen all the wild animals leaving the forest and coming out over the plain.

'I looked a second time,' Mac Roth said. 'I studied the plain before me and saw a dense fog

filling the valleys and hollows, so that the high places in between looked like islands in a lake. I made out sparks of fire through the thick fog, and a world of different colours, of all kinds. Then I saw flashes of lightning, with uproar and thunder. Though there is only a light breeze out today, a great wind came that flung me down on my back and all but swept the hair from my head.'

'What is this, Fergus, do you think?' Ailill said.

'I know well what it is. The men of Ulster have risen from their pangs. It is they who entered the forest, great heroes thronging in might and violence; and they who shook the forest and sent the wild animals fleeing onto the plain. The dense fog you saw filling the hollows, that was the breath of those fierce men filling the valley until the hills in between looked like islands in a lake. The flashes of lightning and the sparks of fire and all those colours you saw, Mac Roth,' Fergus said, 'those were the warriors' eyes, so bright you thought they were sparks of fire. The thunder and thudding and turmoil you heard, that is the humming of their blades and their ivory-hilted swords, the uproar of arms, the clattering of chariots — horse-hooves hammering, fierce chariot-fighters — the outcry of an army: the sound of warriors, the anger and fury and ferocity of the brave as they rage toward the battle. They think they will never reach it, their angry spirit is so high,' Fergus said.

'Let them come,' Ailill said. 'We have warriors to meet them.'

'You'll need them,' Fergus said. 'No one in all Ireland, or the western world from Greece and Scythia westward to the Orkney Islands and the Pillars of Hercules, as far as [the tower of Breogan](#) and the Islands of Gades. can withstand the men of Ulster when their fury is roused.'

Mac Roth went off once more to see how the men of Ulster were coming. He went up to their encampment on the smooth plain of Slemain Midi. Then he came to Ailill and Medb and Fergus and gave them this news:

'A mighty great force, fierce and ferocious, came to the hill at Slemain Midi,' Mac Roth said, 'a full troop of three thousand, I would say. They tore their clothes off straight away and dug a mound of sods where their leader was to sit. He was fair and graceful and tall, a choice royal figure out before his company, handsome and slender. He had light yellow hair cut and curled neatly and reaching down in waves to the shallow between his shoulders. He wore a purple pleated tunic wrapped around him. A rich brooch of red-gold fastened the cloak at his breast. His eyes were very grey and gentle, his face bright and blushing, the brow broad, the jaw narrow. He had a forked and wreathed gold beard. He wore a white, redembroidered hooded tunic and carried a gold-hilted sword reaching to his shoulders, with a bright shield graven with gold animals. He held in his hand the slender shaft of a broad grey stabbing-spear. The finest of the world's princes in figure and dress and fury and following, he advanced with looks of strife, terror, triumph, rage and fierce dignity.'

'Another company came,' Mac Roth said, 'second only to the first in numbers and discipline and dress and terrible fierceness. A fair young hero headed this company, with a green cloak wrapped around him, fastened at his shoulder with a gold brooch. His hair was curled and yellow. He wore at his left an ivory-hilted sword, the hilt cut from a boar's tusk. A bordered tunic covered him to the knee. He carried a scallop-edged, death-dealing shield and a great spear in his hand like a palace-torch with silver rings running one way along the shaft as far as

the tip. then running back to the grip. That company settled at the left hand of the leader of the first company. They squatted with their knees on the earth and their shieldrims at their chins. I thought I heard a stammer in the speech of the great grim champion who led that company.'

'Another company came,' Mac Roth said. 'It looked more than a full troop of three thousand. A wild and wilful man went before them, broad-headed and fairfeatured. He had brown curly hair and a long thin forked beard. He wore a dark-grey fringed cloak wrapped around him, caught on his breast by a leaf-shaped pin of light gold. A white hooded tunic covered him to the knee. He carried a hero's shield graven with animals, a naked sword with a bright silver grip at his waist and a five-pronged spear in his hand. He sat down and faced the leader of the first company.'

'Who are these, Fergus?' Ailill said.

'I know these companies well,' Fergus said. 'Conchobor, king of a province of Ireland, is the one who settled himself on the mound of sods. Sencha mac Ailella, the most eloquent man in Ulster, is the one who sat facing him. Cúscraid Menn Macha, the stammerer, Conchobor's son, is the one who sat at his father's hand. The spear in his hand always plays like that just before a victory: the rings won't run round it at any other time. That was a great group for finding fight and serving out wounds,' Fergus said.

'They'll find what they want here,' Medb said.

'I swear to my people's god,' Fergus said, 'the army wasn't raised in Ireland yet that can resist the men of Ulster when they are provoked.'

'Another company came,' Mac Roth said, 'a troop of three thousand and more, with a great swarthy fiery-faced champion at its head, awesome and terrible. His dark brown hair lay flat on his forehead. He carried a curved scallop-edged shield, with a five-pronged spear in his hand, a forked javelin at his side, and a cruel sword slung behind him. A purple cloak was wrapped around him with a gold brooch at the shoulder. A white hooded tunic covered him to the knee.'

'Who is that, Fergus?' Ailill said.

'The beginner of battle.' Fergus said, 'a man created for war. He falls on his enemies like a doom: Eogan mac Durthacht, king of Fernmag.'

'Another great grim company came to the hill at Slemain Midi,' Mac Roth said, 'with their cloaks thrown back behind them. Dark and steady they came to the hill bringing great dread and terror, I tell you no lie. The clash of their weapons was awful as they marched. A great fearsome champion with a fleshy head was their leader, with sparse grey hair and big yellow eyes. He was wrapped in a yellow cloak with a white border. A scallopedged, death-dealing shield hung at his side. He carried a broad-bladed javelin and a long spear with a blood-stained shaft. Next to it in his hand was another javelin, with the blood of enemies on its blade. A big murderous sword hung at his shoulders.'

'Who is that, Fergus?' Ailill said.

'A warrior who has never shirked the warlike fray. That is Laegaire Buadach, the victorious, son of Connad son of Ilech from Impail in the north,' Fergus said.

'Another great company came to the hill in Slemain Midi,' Mac Roth said, 'with a pleasant,

fat, thick-necked warrior at their head. His hair was black and curled, his face flushed, his grey eyes bright. He wore a noble brownish cloak about him held by a bright silver brooch. He carried a black shield with a knob of bronze and a shimmering spear in his hand, set with eyes. A red-embroidered braided tunic covered him and an ivory-hilted sword hung out over his clothes.'

'Who is that, Fergus?' Ailill said.

'The first in the fray: he advances like a devouring sea-wave over a little stream. A man of three cries. He falls on his enemies like a bitter doom,' Fergus said. 'Munremur mac Gerrcinn, from Moduirn in the north.'

'Another great company came to the hill at Slemain Midi,' Mac Roth said, 'a fine numerous and handsome company, well dressed and disciplined. They hurried fiercely to the hill. They shook the armies with the clash of their weapons as they advanced. A pleasant proud champion came at their head, the most marvellous among men for his hair and eyes and grim aspect, for apparel, bearing, voice, paleness and proud lofty good looks, for weapons and skill and style, for equipment, apt feats, learning, distinction and breeding.'

'As you describe him,' Fergus said, 'that was the bright flame, the fair Fedilmid, an overwhelming storm wave, coming in warrior's rage and irresistible might, full of triumph, from the destruction of his enemies in other lands: Fedilmid Cilair Chetaig.'

'Another company came to the hill at Slemain Midi,' Mac Roth said, 'a full warlike troop of three thousand at the least count, with a great upright sallow warrior bravely at their head. His hair was black and curly, his dull-brown eyes scornful and large. A harsh, firm, bulllike man. He wore a grey cloak around him, held at the shoulder with a silver pin, and a white hooded tunic. He carried a sword at his thigh, and a red shield with a knob of tough silver. He held a broad, triple-riveted blade in his hand.'

'Who is that, Fergus?' Ailill said.

'Connad mac Morna, coming from Callann in an angry glow, bold in battle, the winner of wars,' Fergus said.

'Another company came to the hill at Slemain Midi,' Mac Roth said, 'big as an army in its advance. Seldom will you find a champion of better style and bearing than the leader at the head of that company. His red-gold hair was close-cropped, his flushed face fine and well formed—the jaw narrow, the brow broad — with fine red lips and shining pearls for teeth. His voice rang clear as he lifted his fine, flushed, well-formed face, the most marvellous among men. He wore a purple cloak wrapped around him with an elaborate gold brooch on his white breast. He carried at his left a curved shield with a knob of silver, graven with all kinds of coloured animals. He held in his hand a long bleak-bladed javelin and a keen quick spear. A sword of gold with a gold hilt hung at his back. A red-embroidered hooded tunic wrapped him round.'

'Who is that, Fergus?' Ailill said.

'I know him well,' Fergus said, 'half an army in himself, a barrier in battle, a ravaging mastiff, **Rochad mac Faithemain from Rígdonn**, your own son-in-law that took your daughter Finnabair.'

‘Another company came there to the hill at Slemain Midi,’ Mac Roth said, ‘with a burly, thick-thighed, brawnycalved hero at their head. His legs and arms were each as thick as a man. From head to foot he was a man indeed,’ he said. ‘His hair was black, his face scarred and fiery, with scornful, blazing bloodshot eyes: a sprightly splendid man in every way, horrible and grim. The style and dress and weapons of his warriors made a marvellous spectacle as he came among them in triumph — a hero full of warlike deeds and wilful dignity as he goes against great odds to crush the foe in his anger, scorning fair fight, or as he travels unprotected through hostile lands. Steadily they advanced on Slemain Midi.’

‘That was a flood of skill and courage,’ Fergus said, ‘a flood of hot blood, vigour, power and pride — a force to hold armies together: my own foster-brother, Fergus mac Léte, king of Líné, the battle-crest of the north of Ireland.’

‘Another great grim company came to the hill at Slemain Midi,’ Mac Roth said, ‘in weird apparel, bringing strife before them, with a fine fair hero at their head, magnificent in every way — for his hair and eyes and pallor, his stature, structure and ferocity. He wore five chains of gold, a white hooded tunic, and a green cloak wrapped around him and fastened at the shoulder with a gold brooch. He held a spear like a palace pillar in his hand. A gold-hilted sword hung at his shoulder.’

‘That was a battle-hungry hero, very quick to wrath,’ Fergus said: ‘Amargin the son of the smith Ecet Salach, the grimy one, from Buais in the north.’

‘Another company came to the hill at Slemain Midi,’ Mac Roth said, ‘overwhelming, fiery in splendour, spiky sharp, their numbers legion, a rock-mass, full of strength, doom in battle, a quick thunder. A terrible hero led that company with harsh looks: big-bellied, big-nosed, thickclipped, his hair tough and grizzled, his limbs red. He wore a rough woven tunic and a dark cloak about him with an iron spike fastening the cloak. He carried a curved scallopedged shield and a great grey javelin in his hand, with thirty rivets. A sword that was tempered seven times hung at his shoulders. The whole army rose up to meet him. Troop after troop of them fell into disorder as he proceeded to the hill.’

‘That was the topmost glory coming,’ Fergus said, ‘half an army in himself, he fights so fiercely — a stormy ocean wave breaking over barriers, Celtchar mac Uthidir from Dún Lethglaise in the north.’

‘Another company came there to the hill at Slemain Midi,’ Mac Roth said. ‘At its head was a warrior all in white, his hair and eyelashes and beard all fair and his clothing white. He carried a shield with a knob of gold on it and an ivory-hilted sword in his hand, with a broad, pitted stabbing-spear. He advanced on his way like a high hero.’

‘A most cherished, powerful and death-dealing bear,’ Fergus said, ‘murderous as a bear to the enemy, a mancrusher, the fair and righteous Feradach Finn Fechnach from the wood at Sliab Fuait in the north.’

‘Another company came to the hill at Slemain Midi,’ Mac Roth said, ‘with a terrible warrior out in front. He had a big belly and thick horse’s lips. His hair was dark and curly and he had only one eye. His head was broad and his hand long. A black cloak swung about him, fastened with a disk of tin. He carried a dark-grey shield at his left, and a broad stabbing-spear, banded at the neck, in his right hand. A long sword hung at his shoulders.’

‘A ravening, red-clawed lion,’ Fergus said, ‘sharp and fearful and busy in battle, not to be withstood as he rages on the earth: Errge Echbél, the horse-lipped, from Brí Errgi in the north,’ Fergus said.

‘Another company came there to the hill at Slemain Midi,’ Mac Roth said, ‘with two tender heroes at their head — alike in looks, with heads of yellow hair and two bright shields graven with silver animals. They were the same age. They raised their feet and set them down together, neither out of step with the other.’

‘Two heroes, two pure flames, two battle-spikes,’ Fergus said, ‘two champions and pillars of the fray; two dragons, two fires, two war-like battle champions; the two props and spoiled pets of Ulster and its king.’

‘Who are they, Fergus?’ Ailill said.

‘Fiachna and Fiacha. two sons of Conchobor mac Nesa, the two dear darlings of the north of Ireland,’ Fergus said.

‘Another company came to the hill at Slemain Midi,’ Mac Roth said. ‘Three noble and fiery champions came at their head, with faces flushed, all three with hair goldyellow and cropped. Three cloaks of the same colour were wrapped about them, fastened at the shoulders with gold pins. They wore red-embroidered sleeved tunics. They carried three similar shields. Three gold-hilted swords hung at their shoulders, and three broad grey spears were in their hands. All three of an equal age.’

‘Three fiery torches from Cuib and Midluachair who have done great deeds, three princes of Roth, three hardened soldiers from east of Sliab Fuait,’ Fergus said. ‘Those were Fiachna’s three sons, Rus and Dáire and Imchath, who have come to recover the bull.’

‘Another company came to the hill at Slemain Midi.’ Mac Roth said, ‘a furious lively man at its head, with hot heroic eyes. He wore a speckled cloak with a silver disk to hold it. He carried a grey shield on his left and a silverhilted sword by his side. He held in his wrathful right hand a javelin shaped well for subtle thrusts. A white hooded tunic covered him to the knee. The company about him was red with blood, and he himself marked with blood.’

‘That was a brave and pitiless one,’ Fergus said, ‘a gashing beast, a wild boar in battle, a raving bull, the conqueror from Baile and holder of the gap, the torch of battle from Colptha. the protector of the border of the north of Ireland: Menn mac Sálchada from Corann. He has come to avenge his wounds,’ Fergus said.

‘Another company came to the hill at Slemain Midi,’ Mac Roth said, ‘spirited and eager, with a great longcheeked sallow warrior at their head. He had dark curling hair and wore a fine red woollen cloak and a handsome tunic. A gold pin held the cloak at his shoulder. He wore at his left a sword of great beauty with a hilt of bright silver. He carried a red shield and a grey broad-bladed stabbing-spear in his hand, beautifully worked and set onto its shaft of ash.’

‘That was a man of three hard strokes,’ Fergus said, ‘a man of three roads and highways and byways, a man with three qualities and three cries, who breaks foreign enemies in battle — Fergna mac Finnchaime, from Corann.’

‘Another company came to the hill at Slemain Midi,’ Mac Roth said. ‘It seemed greater than

a troop of three thousand, with a white-breasted, well-favoured warrior at its head, who looked like Ailill in size and handsomeness and apparel, He wore a gold crown on his head, and a red-embroidered tunic. A cloak of great beauty wrapped him round, fastened on the breast with a gold brooch. He carried a gold-rimmed, death-dealing shield and a spear like the pillar of a palace. A gold-hilted sword hung at his shoulder.'

'Like the sea against a stream he comes,' Fergus said, 'a fiery blaze, in irresistible fury against his foes, Furbaide Fer Benn, the horned man.'

'Another company came to the hill at Slemain Midi,' Mac Roth said, 'heroic, numberless, with strange garments, not like the other companies. Their clothes and all their outfit and weapons were remarkable as they marched. This company was a great angry army in itself, with a flushed freckled boy at its head, the most marvellous of men by his looks. He carried on his arm to the glorious battle a gold-rimmed and gold-inlaid shield with a white knob, and a light sharp javelin shimmering in his hand. He wore a red-embroidered white hooded tunic and a purple fringed cloak wrapped round him, held at the breast with a silver pin. A gold-hilted sword hung out over his clothes.'

At that, Fergus was silent.

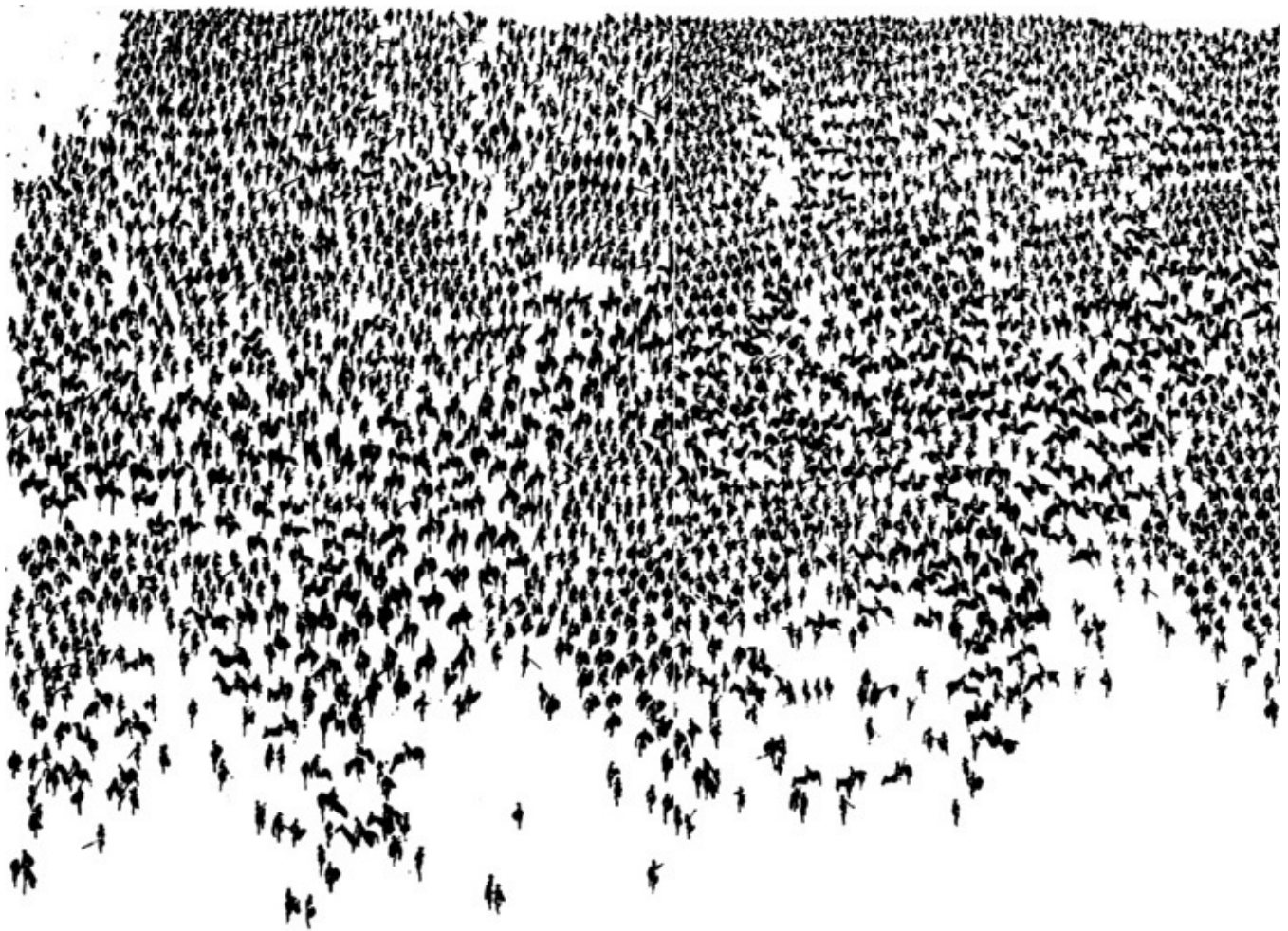
'I don't know anyone like that boy in Ulster,' Fergus said, 'unless these are the men of Temair gathered about the fine and noble well-favoured Erc, son of Coirpre Niafer and Conchobor's daughter. Coirpre and Conchobor are not friendly toward each other, and this boy may have travelled to help his grandfather without asking his father's leave. You will lose the battle on account of this boy,' he said. 'He knows no fear or terror, and when he presses into the midst of your forces the fighting-men of Ulster will raise a manly shout and hack through the fray to save the little calf of their hearts. Seeing the boy in such terrible turmoil they will all fill up with sudden affection and hack a path through the battle. Then the humming of Conchobor's sword will be heard like a mastiff growling as he comes to save the boy. [Conchobor will throw up three mounds of men](#) around the battlefield in the search for his little grandson. And, full of family feeling, the inflamed fighting-men of Ulster will fall on your countless army,' Fergus said.

'I am tired,' Mac Roth said, 'describing all I have seen. But there is something more to say.'

'You have said enough,' Fergus said.

'Nevertheless,' Mac Roth said, 'Conall Cernach and his great company haven't come. Conchobor's three sons and their three troops of three thousand haven't come. [Cúchulainn, wounded in the unequal struggle, hasn't come](#). Many hundreds, many thousands, have reached the Ulster camp. Many heroes and champions and warriors have hurried there to the gathering. But more companies still were on their way there as I left,' Mac Roth said. 'My eye travelled from Ferdia's Ford to Slemain Midi and fell on men and horses instead of hills and slopes.'

'You have certainly seen a man of some following,' Fergus said.



XIV THE LAST BATTLE

CONCHOBOR came with his armies, and spoke to Ailill about a truce until sunrise. Ailill agreed for the men of Ireland and the exiles, and Conchobor agreed for the men of Ulster. Conchobor's tents were pitched and he settled in his camp surrounded by his followers. The men of Ulster were settled before sunset. The ground between the armies lay bare.

In the half light between the two camps, the Morrigan spoke:

‘Ravens gnawing
men's necks
blood spurting
in the fierce fray
hacked flesh
battle madness
blades in bodies
acts of war
after the cloaked one's

hero heat
in man's shape
he shakes to pieces
the men of Cruachan
with hacking blows
war is waged
each trampling each.
Hail Ulster!
Woe men of Ireland!
Woe to Ulster!
Hail men of Ireland!'

This last ('Woe to Ulster') she said in Connachtmen's ears only, to hide the truth from them. [That same night Nét's wives, Nemain and the Badb](#), called out to the men of Ireland near the field at Gáirech and Irgairech, and a hundred warriors died of fright. It was a bad night for them.

Ailill mac Mata chanted on the eve of the battle, saying:

'Rise up, Traightrén, swift-footed. Summon for me the three called Conaire from Sliab Mis; the three fair ones called Les, in Luachair; the three called Meid from Corpthe Loste; the three named Buidir from the river Buas; the three called Badb from the river Buaidnech; the three called Buaideltach from the river Berba; the three Muredachs from Marga; the three Laegaires from Lec Derg; the three Suibnes from the river Siuir; the three Echtachs from Ane; the three called Dael from Eirc; the three called Damach from Derg Derc; the three called Bratruad from Loch Rí; the three named Nelleth from Loch Eirne; the three named Bresal from Bodg; the three named Amalgad from Ai; the three Fiachras from Nemain Wood; the three Nechtas from Muireasc Plain; the three famous sons from Es Ruaid; the three Ruirechs from Aigle; the three Bruchurs from the river Febrad; the three Conalls from Collamair; the three named Féic from Finnabair; the three Coirpres from Cliu; the three named Maine Milscothach; the three Descertachs from Drompa; the three Fintans from Femen Plain; the three Rathachs from Raigne Plain; the three Eterscéls from Eterbán; the three Guaire from Gabail; and [the three named Aed from Aidne](#).'

These men, in groups of three, were all the men of Ireland that survived the former slaughter by Cúchulainn.

At this time Cúchulainn was lying nearby at Fedan Chollna. The landowners there visited him every day and supplied him with food at night. [West of Ferdia's Ford](#) he had killed no one.



‘A small herd of animals has strayed from the western camp over toward our camp in the east, and some servants are coming out after them to bring them back,’ the charioteer said to Cúchulainn. ‘[Now some of our servants from the eastern camp are coming out to take them from them.](#)’

‘The servants will start fighting,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘and the animals will go wandering over the plain while everybody goes to help the servants.’

This is what happened.

‘How are the Ulster servants fighting?’ Cúchulainn said.

‘Like true men,’ the charioteer said.

‘Their honour would make them die for the sake of their herds,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘What is happening now?’

‘The beardless boys have joined the fight,’ the charioteer said.

‘Has the light of the sun touched the clouds yet?’ Cúchulainn said.

‘Not yet,’ the charioteer said.

‘If only I had the strength to join them!’ Cúchulainn said.

‘There will be enough slaughter today without that,’ the charioteer said. ‘Now it is sunrise. The better-born people are joining the battle. The kings haven’t come yet; they are still asleep.’

It was at sunrise that Fachtna said (or some say it was Conchobor who chanted it in his sleep):

‘Rise kings of Macha
modest people
of mighty acts
blades are battering
battle raging
the earth torn up
shields beaten
arms weary
herds bellowing
in the rightful fight
battle ranks trampled
underfoot
lords and princes
lead in battle
or end in blood
a forest of men
where they march and fall
bitter blood drained
hearts of queens
filled with grief
the dire advance
grass soaked with blood
where they stand and fall
rise kings of Macha.’

‘Who chanted that?’ everyone said.

‘Conchobor mac Nesa.’ some said.

‘Fachtna,’ others said.

‘Sleep, sleep — but with your sentries watchful.’

Laegaire Buadach said:

‘Rise kings of Macha
look to your cattle

guard your plunder
drive Connacht's force
from Uisnech hill
men's flanks in danger
sinews on fire
he will fell the world
on the field of Gáirech.'

'Who chanted that?' everyone said.

'Laegaire Buadach mac Connaid Buidi meic Ilech. Sleep, sleep — but with your sentries watchful.'

'Wait a little longer,' Conchobor said, 'until the sun has lit all the hollows and hills of Ireland.'

Then Cúchulainn, from the east, saw the Connacht kings setting their crowns on their heads and coming to relieve their companies. He told his charioteer to rouse the men of Ulster. The charioteer spoke (though some say it was the poet Amargin mac Ecit):

'Rise kings of Macha
modest people
of mighty acts
the Badb covets
the cattle of Impail
heart's gore poured out
strife fills men's veins
to feed brave acts
panic flight
heart's gore on the ground
the battle din dies
is there none like Cúchulainn
to work Macha's will
for Cuailnge's cattle
rise early now.'

'I have woken them,' the charioteer said. 'They are rushing naked to the battle, with nothing but their weapons. Those that were facing to the east have dashed out through the backs of their tents!'

'Necessity is a great spur,' Cúchulainn said.



Then he said:

‘Friend Laeg, how are the men of Ulster doing in the battle?’

‘Like true men,’ the charioteer said. ‘They are fighting closely. Conall Cernach’s charioteer En and I could mount our chariots now and drive over the armies from one wing to the other, and find no place for a hoof or a wheelrim to sink through.’

‘It has the making of a great battle,’ Cúchulainn said. ‘Tell me everything that happens, leave out nothing.’

‘I’ll do the best I can,’ the charioteer said.

‘The warriors from the west have reached the eastern battle-line and broken through,’ he said presently. ‘Now the same number from the east have broken through the western battle-

line.'

'Alas!' Cúchulainn said. 'You would see me attacking there with the rest of them if I had my health.'

The men of Ireland, in their groups of three, advanced to the ford nearer the army — a rare spectacle as they marched to the battle at Gáirech and Irgairech. The nine chariot-fighters from Iruath advanced with them, the three on foot out in front as swift as those in the chariots. But Medb held them back from the battle, to pluck Ailill from the fray if their army was beaten or to kill Conchobor if they won.

Now the charioteer told Cúchulainn that Ailill and Medb were asking Fergus to join the fight, reproaching him with all they had done for him during his exile.

'If only I had my sword,' Fergus said, 'I'd send men's severed heads toppling thicker than hailstones over their shields into the mud. It would be [like a king's horses churning up the ground](#). I swear by my people's god,' he said, 'I'd heap up men's hacked jawbones on men's necks, men's necks on men's shoulders, [their arms on their elbows, with elbows on wrists](#), wrists on fists, fists on fingers, fingers on nails, nails on skulls, skulls on trunks, trunks on thighs, thighs on knees, knees on calves, calves on feet, feet on toes and toes on nails! I'd send necks buzzing through the air like bees humming on a fine day!'

Ailill said to his charioteer:

'Bring me that flesh-piercing sword. I swear by my people's god, if its bloom has faded since the day I gave it to you on that hillside in the land of Ulster, not all of Ireland will save you from me.'

They brought Fergus's sword and Ailill said:

 'Now take your sword
 lay Ireland low
but spare us at Gáirech
 mighty man among boys
if all is true
 not upon us
be your wrath wrought
 let the rage rise
against Ulster's heroes
 at dawn on Gáirech
in the red morning
 we'll see by the sods.'

Fergus said:

 'Bitter blade welcome
 Léte's sword
bearer of quick
 Badb horror

no longer hidden
you have come to avenge
a troop of warriors
sinews smashed
heads toppled
this sword no longer
in a sovereign's keeping
tales to be told
my sword will not
deal death on you
but do you glory
before the men of Ireland.

‘It would be a shame if you were to fall [on this glutted field of battle](#),’ Fergus said to Ailill.

Fergus seized his weapons and went into battle. With the sword held in his two hands, he carved a gap of a hundred men in the ranks. [A hundred Ulster warriors died by his sword](#) in the first onslaught. He came on Conall Cernach.

‘You rage very hard at your kith and kin,’ Conall Cernach said, ‘for the sake of a whore’s backside.’

Then Medb took up her weapons and hurried into battle. Three times she drove all before her until she was turned back by a wall of javelins.

‘Who is forcing the battle against us from the north?’ Conchobor said to those around him. ‘Hold the fighting here and I’ll go and find him.’

‘We will hold out,’ the warriors said, ‘until the earth gives under us, or until the heavens fall on us and make us give way.’

Conchobor sought out Fergus and raised his shield against him — the shield Ochain, the Ear of Beauty, with its four gold horns and four coverings of gold. Fergus struck it three blows but couldn’t budge even the rim of the shield enough to touch Conchobor’s head.

‘What man of Ulster holds that shield?’ Fergus said.

‘A better man than you,’ Conchobor said, ‘one who drove you out to live in exile with the wild dogs and foxes; one who’ll stop you with his battle-deeds today before all the men of Ireland.’

With that, Fergus raised his sword for a vengeful two-handed stroke at Conchobor. As the point touched the ground behind him, Cormac Connlongas flung his arms around him and caught his two hands at the wrist.

‘Harshly, harshly, friend Fergus,’ Cormac said. ‘That would be mean and shameful, and spoil friendships. These wicked blows will cheapen your enmity and break your pacts.’

‘Then where am I to strike?’ Fergus cried.

‘Turn your hand aside. Strike out anywhere. Strike crosswise at those three hills. But remember that Ulster’s honour was never thrown away, and never will be unless you do it

today. Leave us, Conchobor,' Cormac said to his father. 'This man will pour his rage on Ulstermen no more.'

So Fergus turned aside and struck at the hills. With three strokes he levelled the three bald-topped hills of Meath.

Cúchulainn heard the blows Fergus dealt at the hills, and at Conchobor's shield.

'Who struck those terrible blows in the distance?' he said. 'Blood blocks my heart — battle madness tears! Undo these twigs quickly.'

'Fergus mac Roich, the brave, a man among men, struck them,' Laeg answered; 'Fergus mac Roich, in bloodshed and mounting glory — with the sword that was hidden in the chariot-shaft. The great fight has touched Ochain, our master Conchobor's shield.'

'Loosen the hazel twigs. Quickly!' Cúchulainn said. 'Play of swords — men smothered in blood — bodies swallowed up!'

The wisps of rushes sprang up on high like larks, the bindings of hazel-twigs sprang away from him as far as Mag Tuag, the plain of the hazel-bands, in Connacht, and he ran about this way and that. His wounds opened afresh: Medb had sent two handmaids to lament over him and make his wounds open again, telling him how Fergus was fallen and Ulster broken in battle while he was kept from the fight. But he smashed their heads together, so that each was stained grey from the other's brains. The warp-spasm seized him and they put the twenty-seven skin-tunics around him, all strings and straps, that he wore going into battle. He took his whole chariot on his back, the frame and the two rimmed wheels. Then he rushed toward the battle and circled around looking for Fergus.

'Come here, friend Fergus!' Cúchulainn cried, three times before he was answered. 'I swear by Ulster's god,' he said, 'I'll churn you up like foam churned in a pool! I'll stand up over you like a cat's tail erect! I'll batter you as easily as a loving woman slaps her son!'

'What man in Ireland talks to me like that?' Fergus said.

'Cúchulainn, the son of Sualdam and Conchobor's sister,' Cúchulainn said. 'Give way before me.'

'I promised to do that,' Fergus said.

'It has fallen due,' Cúchulainn said.

'Very well,' Fergus said, 'you ran from me once, and now you are riddled with wounds.'

Fergus went off with his troop of three thousand. The men of Galeóin and the men of Munster went away as well. They left Medb and Ailill to the battle, with their seven sons and their nine troops of three thousand men. When Cúchulainn joined the battle it was noon. The sun had reached the tresses of the wood when he smashed their last company. Nothing was left of his chariot but a handful of ribs out of the frame and a handful of spokes from the wheel.



Medb had set up a shelter of shields to guard the rear of the men of Ireland. She had sent off the Brown Bull of Cuailnge to Cruachan by a roundabout road, with fifty of his heifers and eight messengers so that, whoever escaped, the Brown Bull of Cuailnge would be got safely away, as she had sworn.

Then Medb got her gush of blood.

‘Fergus,’ she said, ‘take over the shelter of shields at the rear of the men of Ireland until I relieve myself.’

‘By god,’ Fergus said, ‘you have picked a bad time for this.’

‘I can’t help it,’ Medb said. ‘I’ll die if I can’t do it.’

So Fergus took over the shelter of shields at the rear of the men of Ireland and Medb relieved herself. It dug three great channels, each big enough to take a household. The place is called Fual Medba, Medb’s Foul Place, ever since. Cúchulainn found her like this, but he held his hand. He wouldn’t strike her from behind.

‘Spare me,’ Medb said.

‘If I killed you dead,’ Cúchulainn said, ‘it would only be right.’

But he spared her, not being a killer of women. He watched them all the way westward until they passed Ath Luain, and there he stopped. He struck three blows of his sword at the stone hills nearby. The Bald-topped Hills is their name now, at Ath Luain, in answer to the three Bald-topped Hills in Meath.

The battle was over.

Medb said to Fergus:

‘We have had shame and shambles here today, Fergus.’

‘We followed the rump of a misguiding woman,’ Fergus said. ‘It is the usual thing for a herd led by a mare to be strayed and destroyed.’

They took the bull away on the day after the battle. On Ai Plain, at Tarbga — the place of bull-grief or bull-strife: the hill originally called Roi Dedonn — he met the bull Finnbennach, the White-Horned. Everyone who had escaped the battle stopped what he was doing, to see the two bulls fight together.

The men of Ireland asked who should judge between the bulls. They agreed it should be Bricriu mac Carbad, because he favoured his friend no more than his enemy. So he was brought to a gap between the bulls to judge them. But the two bulls trampled across him as they struggled, and killed him. Such was Bricriu’s death.

The Brown Bull of Cuailnge planted a hoof on the other bull’s horn. All day until nightfall he wouldn’t draw the hoof back toward him. Fergus chided him and took a stick to his flank.

‘It would look bad,’ Fergus said, ‘to get this quarrelsome old calf so far, only to have him throw away the honour of his kind. Men have died on both sides because of you.’

At that, the bull jerked back his hoof. His leg broke, but the other bull’s horn was sent flying to the mountain nearby. It is called Sliab nAdarca, the Mountain of the Horn, ever since. Then

the bulls fought each other for a long time. Night fell upon the men of Ireland and they could only hear the uproar and fury in the darkness. That night the bulls circled the whole of Ireland. When morning came, the men of Ireland saw the Donn Cuailnge coming westward past Cruachan with the mangled remains of Finnbennach hanging from his horns.

He brandished them before him all that day, and at nightfall entered the lake near Cruachan. He came out with Finnbennach's loins and shoulderblade and liver on his horns. The armies went to kill him, but Fergus stopped them and let him go anywhere he liked. He headed toward his own land. He stopped to drink in Finnlethe on the way. He left Finnbennach's shoulderblade there — from which comes Finniethé, the White One's Shoulderblade, as the name of that district. He drank again at Ath Luain, and left Finnbennach's loins there — that is how the place was named Ath Luain, the Ford of the Loins. He uttered a bellow at Iraid Cuillenn that was heard through the whole province. He drank again at Tromma, where Finnbennach's liver fell from his two horns — from which comes the name Tromma, or liver. He came to Etan Tairb and set his brow against the hill at Ath Da Ferta — from which comes the name Etan Tairb, the Bull's Brow, in Murtheimne Plain. Then he went by the Midluachair road to Cuib, where he had dwelt with the milkless cow of Dáire, and he tore up the ground there — from which comes the name Gort mBúraig, the Field of the Trench. Then he went on until he fell dead between Ulster and Uí Echach at Druim Tairb. So Druim Tairb, the Ridge of the Bull, is the name of that place.

Ailill and Medb made peace with Ulster and Cúchulainn. For seven years afterward none of their people was killed in Ireland. Finnabair stayed with Cúchulainn, the Connachtmen went back to their own country, and the men of Ulster went back to Emain Macha full of their great triumph.

FINIT. AMEN

